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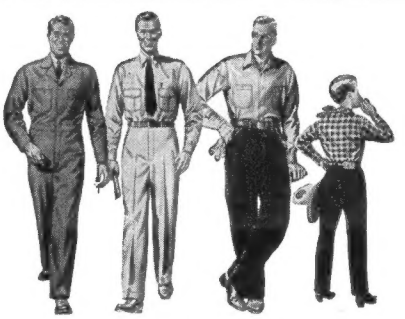

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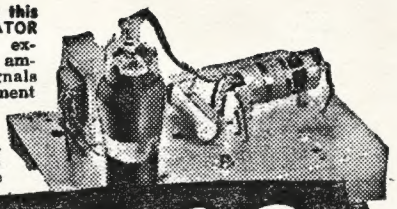

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The Readers' Viewpoint — **6**

In the Next Issue — **55**

Cover and illustrations by Lawrence

All stories in this publication are either new or have never appeared in a magazine.

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The Readers' Viewpoint

Address comments to the Letter Editor, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, All-Fiction Field, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York

MESSAGE FROM U.S.S. WYOMING

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the December issue of F.F.M. The book-length novel, "The Ancient Allan" was swell. I, for one, and some others aboard my ship who also are avid science fiction fans (as this magazine travels through many hands) think how much better it would be if F.F.M. was published monthly or at least bi-monthly.

When we come in port we search for a copy or two of your magazine, so you can easily see how valuable *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* is to us!

Let's have it monthly!

HENRY A. NAZAREWICZ FIC (EM)
U.S.S. Wyoming, Box E,
Fleet Post Office,
New York, N. Y.

Editor's Note: You can tell the boys it is a monthly magazine, Henry.

HIS WISH HAS COME TRUE

The December F.F.M. was great. Let's have more Quatermain stories, by all means. Dunsany's "The Hashish Man" was good. I believe it's a part of a book of his called "A Dreamer's Tales." Most of them are suitable for F.F.M.

F.F.M.'s stories have kept on a very high level of excellence. The only things lacking in the mag., I believe are the Editor's Page and monthly publication. These should be quickly reinstated now that the war has ended. I have watched the magazine from the start and from its second issue it has been at the head of my list. Keep up the good work, and how about more stories by Blackwood? His "John Silence" stories are very good.

EDWARD WOOD.
1224 W. Madison St.
Chicago 7, Ill.

"REVIVIFYING" NEWS

Bless the *Fanews* publication. I just received, by way of this publication, news so startling, so wonderful, that I'm sitting down and writing this letter copy on anything I can get my hands on. Yes, truly wonderful news has arrived for all fandom. F.F.M. is going monthly! And what's more F.F.M. is the first of any formerly monthly fantasy pro mags. to resume its monthly publication dates. Yes, certainly great news and revivifying (yes, there is such a word).

Great news as this is, it should not occupy an entire letter. I will continue with consideration of "our" magazine's latest (last) issue's merits. First, the cover: a symbolic Lawrence—what more could be desired? Except of course, a monthly cover by Lawrence; with equal opportunity for Finlay, Paul, and any other as well qualified, if any others exist.

I have a brief note of suggestion to append here. It is in regard to an innovation which I would like, as a matter of course, to see instituted in your magazine — finest in the field as it is. A popular science monthly magazine has had since Jan. 1945 a system of filing assistance whereby a red stripe is placed upon the "backbone" or backing of its respective issues, which when a year's issues are gathered together, forms a diagonal line for the 12 consecutive issues—of the volume. I believe this collectors' filing aid is rather useful and if everyone approved F.F.M. would be one innovation richer. This would be only fitting and proper for a magnificent leader of magazines in a chosen field.

I only hope you print as many literary masterpieces as are available and that that be forever—abstractly, of course. I did enjoy the December '45 issue inasmuch as it added one more Dunsany tale to my collection and of course Haggard's "Ancient Allan" was superb. I do hope you improve and know you are destined but to go ahead.

I suggest stories by Clark Ashton Smith and Lovecraft—the rarer items, as well as any and all of those many fine selections chosen for suggestion of publication by other fans, in past issues of F.F.M.

RICHARD W. HALL.
5266 No. 48th St.
Milwaukee 9, Wisconsin.

P.S. I wish to hear from fellow collectors whose services I can use and from any and all fan-letter-writers. (Oh, yes!—illustrations on pages 61 and 95, of the December issue, especially the latter, were marvelous!) Thank you.

ABOUT H. RIDER HAGGARD

Joseph Sohn, in his preface to Haggard's "Nada the Lily" has this to say: "Since the death of Richard Wagner no man worthy of mention has to my knowledge entered the mysterious land of the Sage until Rider Haggard appeared. He also has depicted Nature in the widest and grandest sense of the word... As soon as the first novels of this remarkable writer appeared they created a genuine sensation among readers all over the world because even the most superficial reader vaguely recognized that he was confronted by an author of great originality . . . by the extraordinary force of Haggard's imagination." This, indeed, is great praise, but in my humble opinion richly deserved. My own set of Haggard's works, published by I. Collier around the turn of the century includes "Allan Quatermain," "Allan's Wife" and "King Solomon's Mines" to which

(Continued on page 8)

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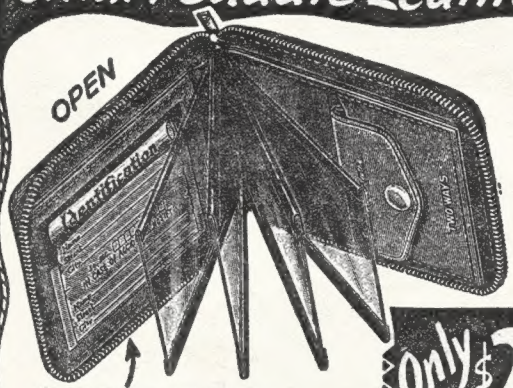

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(Continued from page 6)

I was able recently to add "Child of Storm." But "The Ancient Allan" has eluded my search up to now, so that you can imagine my delight at seeing it published in the December '45 issue of F.F.M.

And while I am on the subject of H. R. Haggard, if there are any of our readers who have copies of "She and Allan," "Allan and the Ice-Gods," "Ayesha," "The Ivory Child," "Queen of the Dawn," "Allan and the Holy Flower," or "When the World Shook," will they please get in touch with me? Need I say that all these would be appropriate for publication in our magazine?

Also, while I am about it, let me say that I would be greatly indebted to any reader who can supply me with the March, 1944 issue of F.F.M., featuring "The Man Who Was Thursday" by Chesterton, and the September, 1944 issue, with "The Day of the Brown Horde," by Tooker. Going further back, there are others I am looking for, as follows: October, 1941—"Palos of the Dog Star Pack"; December, 1941—"The Afterglow"; February, 1942—"Citadel of Fear"; June, 1942—"Burn, Witch, Burn"; September, 1942—"A Brand New World".

Any readers having these need only drop me a post-card or letter, stating their desires; all will be answered.

STEPHEN WEBER.

105 Oak St.,
Weehawken, N.J.

BUFFALO FANS, ATTENTION!

I'm mainly interested in contacting all fantasy fans from Western New York. At one time we had a very nice little club going and there's no reason why we can't do it again. So I'm asking everyone living in or around Buffalo to drop me a line and we'll see if we can't get the ball rolling again. It's true that I can't be present for the nonce but I plan to be out of the Army before too many months have passed and then we could get down to real business.

So common, Gang, let's hear from you. I've got some beautiful "fantastic" originals that are looking for a permanent home. And the wall of a club house is the best place I can think of for them.

I hope you don't reprint too many Haggard stories. Ditto William Hope Hodgson. I'm sending you copies of "Castaway" by Cozzens, "Land Under England," "The World Below," "Jewel of Seven Seas" and "Number 87." Even if you can't print them, I'm sure you'll enjoy reading them. They're all very good stories.

By, the way, I'm trying very hard to locate a copy of "Out Of The Silence" by Earl Cox. If anyone has a copy will he please get in touch with me?

PVT. KENNETH J. KRUEGER.

A.S.N. 42172648,
Co. N, Sec. D, WDPC,
Fort Devens, Mass.

WRITTEN MAY 17, 1945

While in the Army I rather lost contact with fandom, but I have managed to keep on reading your mag. and others and also to have a copy of F.F.M. at home through purchasing two copies of each issue.

I just received the March issue containing "The Boats of the Glen Carrig" and "Even a Worm," a little belated, but welcome. And I read it one night sitting by a radio, which I operate, in the rolling hills of Germany. First I'll comment on said issue. I have read three stories by Hodgson and the "Boats" is the worst of the three, but still I clamor for more Hodgson. His titles fascinate me. Now to tear apart "Even a Worm." The idea is good but I never read anything that struck me so much as a bad piece of writing in a fantasy mag. The story jumped all over the place. It left you in mid-air about fifty times. The ending was clever, however.

A year ago I asked for stories by Machen and Blackwood. You gave me one of each, so now I'm giving you another boost. I think their stories extremely good, as I lean toward horror tales. Very few stories have ever so completely scared me as Machen's "The Novel of the Black Seal" and Blackwood's "Willows." How about both of them with illustrations by Bok or Lawrence? And more of them than just these two . . . what do you say?

Howard Lovecraft would have liked Europe—it's so old-fashioned, but I can't say I care for it.

Anyway, Ed., you're doing fine—keep up the good work.

GILBERT MORTON.

Formerly of Storm Lake, Iowa,
now in Germany.

LIKES PORTFOLIO

A day or two ago I received from you a copy of the Lawrence Portfolio No. 1. I can hardly say how pleased I was! They are certainly excellent reproductions and quite suitable for framing. I wish Lawrence would do all his major illustrations with a border, as with the ones from "Lost Continent" and "Day of the Brown Horde." It seems to add dignity to the magazine. One of these days, in the far future, how about a portfolio of the cover illustrations from past issues, without titles. It would certainly be very expensive but I think it would justify the cost.

About a fortnight before I received the portfolio I sent you a subscription on the lifting of the censorship regulations, etc. I hope you received it, and am looking forward to receiving the first copy.

Now that the war is over, how about a more frequent publication, at least bi-monthly? You must surely have enough material. I would like to see more illustrations by Ronald Clyne.

Your last three or four novels seems to be primarily adventure-fantasy—how about another novel after the style of the "Blind Spot" or "Serapion"—something psychic perhaps?

Well, I'm looking forward to an F.F.M. with trimmed edges, illustrations by Finlay and Lawrence—no advertisements in the center of

(Continued on page 65)

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

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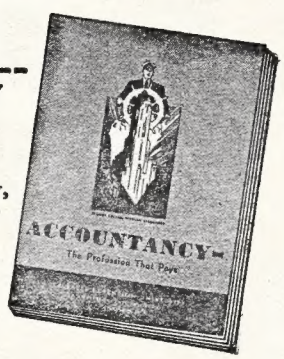

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BEFORE THE DAWN

By

John Taine

CHAPTER I

THE LITTLE FOLK

Blindly they lived, savagely they died, the monstrous outcasts of a half made world—until the day when they waged their last titanic battle for survival, long before the dawn of Eden. . . .

AN INVISIBLE needle of light pried its way into the minute cavities of an uncut diamond.

Of the three watching that epochal experiment with the electronic analyser, Langtry alone was at ease. He had invented the "clock", as he called his ingenious decipherer of the secrets of light, and he felt confident of success. Bronson, the stocky, practical president of the American Television Corporation, breathed heavily and kept his eyes on the diamond. Old Professor Sellar, the archaeologist, erect and tense, tried not to seem too expectant, although it was his own restless curiosity that had started the whole series of experiments of which this was the climax.

"Watch for the violet—it is coming." Langtry warned.

As the invisible needle-point of light found its mark in the heart of the diamond, a soft violet radiance shimmered on the air, bathing the crystal.

"We've got it," Bronson exclaimed, starting forward.

"Yes; but what?" Sellar muttered. "How far back, Langtry?"

Still crimson and smoking with the blood of its prey, the murderous claw flashed down and out of the picture. . . .

"I can't tell. Wait and see if anything condenses."

The violet light palpitated and gradually expanded. From a globule the size of a cherry it swelled to a huge ball, five yards or more in diameter, and seemed to live. Through the clear violet atmosphere of the pulsating sphere swift flashes of crimson and yellow, of blue and green, like the changing colors of a fire opal, flashed and instantly disappeared.

"Do either of you see anything?" Bronson demanded. "The focus is all wrong. I get nothing but a blur of color."

"Wait," Langtry counselled confidently. He stepped back a few feet. "We are not looking at it in scale," he said. "Ah, I see the trouble. The image is upside down." He made a delicate readjustment of the "clock". "How's that?"

"I still see nothing—" Sellar began. Before he could finish they all saw it—the

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first record of television *in time* ever to be seen by human eyes.

The record was stimulating but disappointingly brief. The swirling crimson and yellow wisps of light suddenly rushed together near the center of the violet globe, shimmered indecisively for a second, and congealed. A monstrous curved talon like a vulture's, but as long as a man's arm and twice as thick at the base, hovered for an instant in the violet haze. Then, still crimson and smoking with the blood of its prey, the murderous claw flashed down and out of the solid picture.

For some moments there was silence. Then Langtry spoke.

"Well?" he queried.

"We've done it," Bronson agreed to the inventor's unexpressed question. "That was no figment of our disordered imaginations!"

LANGTRY made the basic discovery while engaged on a purely practical and humdrum detail of ordinary television engineering. He modestly insists that it was all a lucky accident and perhaps he is right. If so, it was that fortunate kind of mischance that happens only to the right man looking for the wrong thing—like Röntgen, when he surprised himself by discovering X-rays.

Langtry's "clock", or "televisor", or electronic analyser, to give the device its scientific name, does for light what a phonograph does for sound. The records which the televisor "plays" are nature's, and the older they are the clearer.

But one serious defect remains to be overcome before the televisor can be marketed profitably, that of "unscrambling" a particular record and reassembling it in the natural time sequence. At present this has been done only at enormous expense in the laboratories. The difficulty is similar to that of getting a perfect symphony out of bucketfuls of badly smashed phonograph records. Before the symphony can be played, the puzzle of fitting the shattered fragments into smooth, whole records must be solved.

To return to Langtry's "accident", for which Professor Sellar was directly responsible. For over thirty years Sellar had devoted all his working hours to the apparently hopeless puzzle of reading the grotesque stone records left by the Mayan priests and astronomers.

All his mature life he had been tormented by a vague feeling that there must be some exact *physical* means for dating historical monuments. Must not something happen to a slab of polished limestone or granite in the course of centuries, to store up forever the record of the days and nights, and dawns and the sunsets, the frosts and the scorching summers it has taken, year after year and century after century? That every dead or living thing must carry with it the whole of its history, in some readable shape or another, seems obvious to anyone who believes, as Sellar did, that nature is something more than a welter of utterly lawless accidents.

Granted that Sellar's belief was not baseless, his problem came down to finding what language is nature's own, and in what script she conceals her secrets from too curious eyes. The script is light itself, and the language is the simplest and most direct of all, the moving record of events as they happen. Only when the very atoms of the rocks are dissipated into their primal electricities and smoothed out in eternal nothing, will nature be inscrutable and the past forgotten beyond recall.

Unable to believe wholeheartedly in his various rivals' theory of dating by eclipses, and not being a physicist, Sellar consulted his old friend Bronson.

"I'll ask young Langtry to think about it," he promised. "If he gets an idea, I'll let you know."

The result was that Langtry resolved to devote all his spare minutes to the "clock".

At the time, he was perfecting an intricate amplifying device for measuring the exact degree of worn-outness of the large and expensive grids used in the television tubes of his company. The theory behind these practical measurements was simple in the extreme. When light impinges on a smooth metal surface some of the outer electrons in the atoms are knocked off—to speak the older language of a much modified theory. By measuring the amount of electric current thus liberated by the light, it was possible to calculate for how long the surface of the metal had been bombarded and pitted by earlier impacts of light or other intense radiation. The earlier light left its own record in the metal.

From that hint to the end was a long way, but one marked at every step by legible signposts. Langtry read the easier of these; it required the combined efforts of the world's greatest engineers and experts on theories of quanta and radiation to decipher the rest. But the signs were finally read, and by properly amplifying the variable photoelectric current emitted

by a lump of dead matter, men at last deciphered the unaging records of all the light that had ever shone on the lump.

Just as the phonograph restores the music recorded in the serrated grooves of a disc, which apparently are as unlike sound as the roughened surface of a crystal is unlike a living picture of events long past forgotten, so the televisor unweaves from the slightly modified atoms all the history of the light which, ages ago, robbed them of a few electrons.

SELLAR offered his most treasured possession for the ultimate test of the "clock." This was a beautiful Mayan calendar stone, as smooth in its polished perfection as it was the day it left its maker's hands.

"See in what year this was finished," he directed Langtry. "If your tubes date it within a century of the lunar eclipse recorded upon it, I'll begin to believe you may have something. I'll not tell you my date till you give me yours. Bronson can be our witness."

Langtry adjusted the calender stone on the revolving steel patform and prepared to focus the exploring needle of monochromatic light. The inventor turned a screw switch, and announced that he was ready.

A switch was closed, and the invisible needle began feeling its way into every microscopic cavity of the polished stone and finally stopped.

"I date your calendar stone, with a probable error of less than a year, as Seven Hundred and Four A. D.," Langtry said.

For a moment Sellar's face was a blank with astonishment.

"A wild coincidence, eh?" Langtry smiled. "Let's see if I can hit another. Anything else you want me to try?"

Flushing slightly, Sellar fished about in the roomy pocket of his work jacket, and somewhat shamefacedly produced a greenish lump of translucent crystal. He held it up for their inspection.

"This was found in the gravel near Xlitctl. The gravel bed had been buried under a lava outflow eight feet thick." He paused for a moment with a wry smile. "No geologist will risk his reputation guessing when that outflow occurred. They admit that it must have been before the Christian era, because the lava itself is buried under three distinct strata of rubbish from prehistoric ruins, and the strata are separated by layers of silt washed down from the mountains. So," he concluded confidently, "whatever this is, it is at least as old as anything human in America." He passed it to Bronson. "See what you think it represents."

Bronson turned the greenish lump over and over till he accidentally found which position was intended to be right side up. "Why," he exclaimed, "it's a crude statuette of a woman in a sitting posture."

"Precisely," Sellar agreed. "And there's not a legible scratch anywhere on her to give a clue to her age. The crystal is calcite—fairly soft and quite easily worked. Well, Langtry, see what you make of this. I'll accept anything up to two thousand B. C."

What followed will doubtless be remembered long after our time as one of the great moments in the history of the world. Langtry adjusted the calcite statuette in the apparatus, and Bronson stood ready to take down the readings. Slowly, at first, then jerkily in great staggering jumps, the pointer swept over a full two-thirds of the scale. Gradually the pointer came to rest, trembled as if struggling to exceed the limit of its feeble strength, and then, so gently that it seemed to die, slid back over the scale. The life-giving impulse of the light was spent, the story told.

Langtry hesitated long before venturing to announce the result of his carefully checked calculations.

"The date is preposterous," he began diffidently. "But I can't help how absurd it may seem. I've run that clock backwards and forwards, and I know it can't lie. Your calcite woman dates 35937 B. C."

"That woman may be ancient," Sellar remarked dryly; "but she is not that old. Try it again."

"Another test," Bronson suggested, "and we'll call it a day. If this agrees, we can't beat your clock. Whatever Sellar says, that woman was chipped out of the crystal over thirty-six thousand years ago."

Why this run should have proved the turning point, neither Langtry nor any of the radiation experts of the world understands to this day. Did Langtry accidentally expose some deep, invisible fissure of the calcite image to the penetrating needle of light, letting light meet light in a clash of transcendant remembrance? Or had the prolonged exposures at last broken down the resistance—"darkness"—of the hardened shell of the image, thus permitting the prisoned history of a thousand million years to escape in one blinding revelation of ages that the very minerals of the earth have forgotten?

There was a faint, sharp hiss; the greenish lump of crystal melted and became a shapeless, soapy mass of yellow glass; a blinding violet light filled the room, and for one brief moment the three amazed spectators caught fleeting glimpses of a cosmic tragedy which flashed up and out with the speed of light.

No two of the three agreed on what they had seen. Each remembered but a fragment of the whole that slowly developed, like the image on a photographic film, on their over-stimulated retinas. Sellar still insists that he saw teeming cities and vast battles flash by; Bronson recalls only the upheaval of a colossal mountain range as it seemed to shoulder its bulk up through the crust of the earth—a vision of millions of years compressed to a fraction of a second; while Lantry saw nothing but a whirling fire compact of the tragedies of worlds, stars and galaxies.

Their first thought when their eyes again became normal was the same. They had blundered onto a greater thing than they had sought. Bronson broke the silence.

"We must learn how to slow it down. Then we shall really see."

"Perhaps," Sellar agreed. "But what?"

"Everything that lump of calcite has seen," Langtry spoke up with quiet confidence. "It may take a thousand years, but it will be done. And it will be worth doing."

Success was delayed, but not for so long as Langtry had anticipated. It was early discovered that crystals had preserved the best light records of the past. From there it was but a short step to use diamonds almost exclusively in the earlier experiments.

The first actual image, that of the gigantic talon, was obtained by the use of a diamond, as has been described.

Of all the prehistoric objects analyzed by the televisor, fossil plants consistently gave the best results.

The dramas which we witnessed were soundless. Their last echoes passed into the eternal silence hundreds of millions of years before the human race emerged from the compelling shadows of the past.

So real were those intangible shapes of solid, moving color evoked by modern science, that we frequently found ourselves fleeing in instinctive terror, although we realized that the gigantic actors had vanished from the face of the earth ages ago—ages before the Andes slowly heaved up their massive bulk above the desolation. In the perfected records the actors were life size and the stage acres in extent. We too walked upon the stage, but as spectators, not actors.

Often we were surprised into striking out blindly to protect ourselves from the hurtling onslaught of a hundred tons of snarling, reptilian fury, only to realize that the attack was aimed, not at us, but at another actor in the drama. Both had passed from the scene of life millions of years before the first cave dwellers crouched shivering over their smoky hearths. We passed through the bodies of the combatants as if they were air. They were not air, but insubstantial, living light.

If at times we felt dwarfed and puny in the presence of nature's giants—her masterpieces so far as almost brainless feeding, fighting, and breeding machines are in any sense masterpieces—we usually recovered when we remembered that we, after all, survived, while they perished. And if nature had tried to erase forever the record of a futility which took all of nine million years to work out to its predestined failure, we flattered ourselves that men had succeeded in exposing the records of her blunder for all to see.

THE technicians like to think that their first real success with the televisor recorded the birth of that superb brute of the later records whom they have affectionately named Belshazzar.

Encouraged by Langtry's success with the uncut diamond, the engineers at once repeated his experiment, using the same diamond. They first worked to get a more extensive globe of violet light. Having accomplished that, they labored for three months to slow down the speed of the color condensation.

It was difficult to realize, when a perfect image was at last achieved, that we were looking at a mere image, painted in light, and not at the tawny sands of a real desert sweltering under a tropical sun. The transparent air quivered above the yellow sands in the heat haze, and we all but felt the vast silence crushing us down into the burning desolation.

The scale of the image at first puzzled us. Was this a mere patch of the desert, or were we seeing thousands of square miles focused into the blinding intensity of a fifty foot image? At the first glance there was nothing to give us the scale. No unmistakable horizon was visible, and no distant peak loomed up to set a relative standard.

An exclamation from Sellar directed our

eyes to a spot on the sand about five feet from the centre of the image.

"Eggs!"

We followed his finger, and instantly adjusted our eyes to the true scale. It was a patch of sand we were viewing, and not the whole desert. What some of us had mistaken for a curious, haphazard three dozen or so of brownish stones the size of large potatoes, was revealed as a badly scattered bushel of smooth, long eggs. The depression in the sand which had formed the nest was still plainly visible. It was obvious that the eggs had only recently been scattered. By whom? We soon discovered. Langtry saw her first.

"There!" he exclaimed. "In the nest."

She was a beautiful little creature with her tawny, hairless skin mimicking the desert sands, and her quick, enquiring brown eyes. Although it was only a guess in the absence of any absolute scale, we judged her to be about the size of a large house cat. Somehow she reminded us of a greatly overgrown but very young mouse.

When we first spied her she was busy with both forepaws readjusting her troublesome young. These she carried conveniently in a capacious pouch on her stomach. She might have been a small kangaroo, except for her sharp pointed ears and the long whiplash tail which rested on the sands behind her in a graceful sinusoid. Art could not have devised a curve more pleasing to the eye than the careless grace of that resting tail.

Having seen that her young were getting their proper food, the mother concentrated her mind on her own wants. The tail flickered, and she hopped forward. One of the long potato-like eggs was her objective. Settling down luxuriously in the warm sand, she reached quickly forward and picked up the egg in her paws. Then for the first time we saw her dainty teeth, sharper than needles. They were ideal for piercing the tough skin of that snaky egg. With one expert nibble she punctured the leathery hide. In two minutes she had the egg dry, and hopped to the next.

This time her lunch was not so good. Possibly the egg she coveted had been the first laid, or had rested in the hottest spot of the nest. Anyway it was ripe to the hatching point. Unable to obtain any liquid nourishment, the hungry mother ripped open the sac with her incisors, and thrust her nose into the vent.

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Something in that evil purse disgusted her, for she quickly flung it wide. As the egg struck the sand a feeble, squirming reptile like a salamander fell out and sprawled on its back, pawing at the sky. Its ridiculously short forelegs were mere vestiges of hands, but its hind legs already gave promise of tremendous muscular development and invincible brutality. If that puny wriggler was indeed Belshazzar, his entrance was extremely undignified and no prophecy of his heroic exit.

The voracious little robber of reptile nests was about to attack her third egg when she stiffened as if suddenly frozen. Her intelligent brown eyes widened and she clutched frantically at the pouch containing her young. In her alert, wary tenseness she made a perfect picture of listening.

We of course heard nothing. But the nervous rigidity of that small creature's body conveyed more to us than a cannonade. Before the battle began we felt the barrage and sensed the enemy's charge. Her anxious, intelligent awareness made us her allies—across the abyss of millions of years. She was of our own kind, her enemy was not.

IN VIEWING the charge we were in the position of a cavalryman who has been thrown from his mount and who sees nothing but the flash of galloping hoofs. Our diminutive ally saw the charge coming, and through her wary movements we also followed every manoeuvre of the advancing enemy. She waited till the charge was about to overwhelm her. Our instinctive but futile shout of warning coincided with her own sideward leap as she deftly evaded the plunging foot. One talon of it would have obliterated her family. The huge birdlike foot with its four vicious talons, each the length of a man's arm, buried itself in the sands, flashed up, and again plunged down with the impact of a trip-hammer, only again to miss its mark.

Blundering brute force proved itself a poor second against the spark of intelligence behind that insignificant mammal's eyes. Wherever the huge birdlike foot blundered and smashed its futile fury into the sands, she was simply absent, often by a margin of an inch, but still absent.

We began to wonder what our ally's strategy was. One rigid forepaw was clutched tightly over the pouch on her stomach. If she was solicitous for her young why did she not flee? Instead of seeking absolute safety, she skirted its margin with a reckless deviltry that brought our hearts into our mouths. Two plunging feet, eight terrible talons in all, now menaced her. One of the talons, we noted, was crimson with smoking blood. The gigantic brute whose feet alone were visible in that first partial image had blundered from one battle, in which he—or possibly she—had triumphed over an enemy his own size into another, only to be baffled and defeated by an opponent who might have perched like an inconspicuous mouse on the tip of the least claw of the attacker.

Our ally received not so much as a scratch. We surmised that she was waiting for the fury of her brainless enemy to fritter itself out in futile stamping. Then she would calmly resume her feast on the enemy's eggs. Few were now left; the outraged parent had smashed most of them in a stupid, instinctive attack to safeguard an unborn generation. Against a single spark of intelligence the gigantic brute had less chance than an animated tractor.

All but three of the eggs had now been pulped in the sand. Belshazzar—if indeed it was he—had also escaped. During the battle he had somehow managed to flop over on his belly. When we next noticed him, he was wriggling pathetically toward our ally, feebly propelling himself in spasmodic jerks by his hind legs. He was favored with one quick, bright glance from our ally just as she gracefully sidestepped a flashing talon. There was something not altogether kind in that swift, direct glance.

"What a murderous look," Sellar muttered. "That little devil means business."

Indeed she did. Before the wriggler came within a yard of her safety zone, she changed her tactics. The long whip-like tail stiffened, and she was off. In three hops she was out of the picture.

FOR some minutes the brainless attacker continued to dent the sand, unaware that his foe had withdrawn. Worn out at last—we simply could not credit the owner of those blundering feet with sufficient intellect to organize a pursuit—the enemy staggered off and vanished from the narrow compass of the image. The huge birdlike feet were all we saw, but their shuffling exhaustion was as complete a picture of hopeless frustration as any masterpiece of Napoleon's flight from Moscow. He was beaten, and he did not know it.

Our bright-eyed friend did not delay her return long. As coolly as if there had been no recent unpleasantness, she hopped back into the arena. The three eggs were still intact, as was also the wriggler. First she disposed of the eggs. All were evidently fresh and palatable. Then she turned her attention to the child of her enemy and the enemy of her children. With bared teeth she hopped toward it. As clearly as if she had spoken across the abyss of ages she told us by her every movement what her purpose was. She had no intention of devouring the helpless wriggler. She merely wished to kill it by nipping it in the neck.

A fair, brainy fight is not unpleasant to witness. Cold blooded murder revolts normal intelligence. We wished she would not do it. But she had no conscience, only a fierce and natural loathing for the hereditary enemies of her parvenu race. Fortunately for our squeamishness she was balked.

Not till many months later did we fully understand what urged the rout which we now witnessed. The tantalizing meagreness of the image exasperated us, but the engineers could do nothing at the time to widen the narrow horizon. What we saw was a mere patch, about fifty feet in diameter, of a teeming panorama which must have occupied hundreds of square miles.

Just as she was about to nip the helpless reptile, our friend stiffened and jerked erect. For two seconds she was rigid statue of fear. Then she wheeled on her haunches, pressed both forepaws over her pouch, and leapt from our view.

The manner of her disappearance was so incongruous that we shouted with laughter. She vanished as if she had plunged through an invisible wall. It all happened in less than two seconds. First her head vanished, then her body, and finally the stiffened tail was rammed into the void after her. She had merely leapt through and clear out of the spherical image projected by the televisor. Millions of years now separated us from her.

The wriggler also seemed to be anxious to get away. Crude, automatic reflexes urged it into desperate, floundering efforts to move faster. We ourselves almost sensed the sudden drop in temperature as the air above the scorching sand ceased to quiver, and the sand dimmed from blinding yellow to dusky gold.

Although we saw no vegetation in the patch of desert visible to us, we could only hope that some dry twig lay not far beyond the range of the televisor. Even a newly hatched reptile is entitled to a sporting chance for his life, and we trusted that the young son of our late enemy would manage to crawl aboard some seaworthy ark. For we could almost feel the approaching deluge.

Long before it came—we did not see it—the rout of the valiant mammals was in full tide. What must have been their multitude could be guessed from the fleeing horde which streamed across the narrow circle of our vision. For the most part they were smaller than our vanished friend, although now and then a larger hopper of a different species bounded over the rabble.

The spark of intelligence which we had admired in our friend's eyes was absent from those of this precipitate mob. Fear, and fear alone, animated them. Whatever it might be that had routed their host, it was no ordinary enemy that courage might face and intelligence overcome. They were vanquished by one whom it would be folly to resist.

A swift change came over the image. The gold of the sands deepened to brown; the routed mammals became blurs of fleeting purple, and the whole image quivered uncertainly as if in the throes of death. The light which millions of years ago had left its record in the atoms of the diamond was dying.

The engineers' efforts to amplify the expiring light failed. But their ineffectual effort gave us one last fleeting vision, as the crystal canted—a black sky ablaze with stars. In that glimpse we recognized an old landmark of our race. Sirius glittered in all his flaming brilliance, and almost at the zenith a cluster of stars like a bunch of grapes glistened icily. We recognized the Pleiades. But their aspect was unfamiliar, as if the cluster were richer in stars than our race has known it. Orion too was strange, but recognizable. We were gazing out on a younger heavens.

ONE of the most obstinate difficulties with the earlier televisors was that of superposed images. The same specimen—crystal or fossil—frequently threw into the projector a wild confusion of several conflicting scenes, so that it was all but impossible to follow a particular action clearly from setting to climax. The trouble was similar to that which a careless amateur encounters when he takes a dozen photographs on the same film.

To overcome this difficulty it was necessary, in the experimental stage, to study large scale images intensively. For this purpose Bronson ordered the construction of a twenty acre arena, where events of considerable magnitude might be reproduced precisely as they had happened, without distortion in any detail.

The project was less formidable than it sounds. All that was necessary was twenty acres of level, hard ground suitably screened from premature publicity and idle interference. A circular fence forty feet high enclosing twenty acres of level, packed dirt covered by an inch of concrete was finally constructed as an ideal outdoor laboratory.

For technical reasons the projecting lenses, condensers, analysers, amplifiers, and the rest of the scientific necessities were assembled in the centre of the arena. Under the steel roof of the open rotunda sheltering the scientific apparatus, the engineers toiled day and night, in all weathers, to perfect the images and bring ordered sequences of events out of a whirling chaos of conflicting dramas.

Another strange effect of these vast outdoor pictures may be mentioned, as we never got used to its dreamlike quality. In midwinter, when the thin concrete of the stage was cracking and snapping under the intense cold, the blinding heat of sun smitten deserts, or the sticky humidity of tropical jungles, sweltered on the biting air. It was perhaps even more strange to witness the frozen glare of a dying continent on an August afternoon, when the thermometer registered 90° and the humidity stood at 80°.

A raw February day gave the engineers their first satisfactory full image.

Promptly at eight the morning of the test, Bronson met Langtry outside the arena, and they proceeded at once to the engineers' rotunda.

"Infernally cold, isn't it?" Bronson remarked to Sellar, who had arrived half an hour earlier.

"Ugh," Sellar grunted. "Hullo! What the dickens is that? I could swear I saw those mountains in Guatemala thirty years ago. Am I. . . ?"

"Not in the least," Langtry reassured him. "The technicians are just feeling out the true focus of the projectors."

"But those mountains—"

"I know. If they're anywhere near Guatemala, they're probably buried under thirty thousand feet of slime, mud, sand and rock at the bottom of the Caribbean Sea. They were wiped off the map before Guatemala lifted itself out of the ocean."

"But I saw them—"

"Take another look." Langtry shouted an instruction to the three men struggling with the projectors. "Distort it eight to one for a second or two. Professor Sellar wants to see the vegetation on the foothills."

The purple and azure mass of the distant range quivered, vanished like a mirage, and instantly in the air forty feet from the rotunda, a streaming jungle of stunted conifers, tall ferns and clublike palms shimmered in sultry silence.

"Ever see trees like those in Guatemala?"

"No, nor anywhere else," Sellar admitted testily. "Phew, how hot it is." He stripped off his heavy topcoat, only to put it on again in a hurry, as the image blurred and the precipitous range once more sprang into purple and azure shadow in the distance.

"It's coming up clear now," one of the engineers shouted. "Better get out near the wall if you want to be in the best of it. Over there—due north."

AS THEY hastened toward the indicated location, the color condensations on the concrete floor of the arena began to swarm into definite images. Again the scene was desert sands. But this time they saw the horizon, a dark blue band of dense vegetation, deepening mile after mile to the base of the shadowy mountains.

The image condensed with startling rapidity. If the reader has ever enjoyed one of those old fashioned indoor panoramas of vast scenes which were popular a generation ago—there was a very fine one of the siege of Paris at the old Crystal Palace in London—he will appreciate the dwarfed feeling experienced by the three men as they penetrated this incomparably vaster panorama taking solid shape all around them. These images were not mere paint on plaster or canvas. They were solid light, and it required a conscious exertion of the will to walk resolutely forward, instead of weaving one's way around jagged outcrops of glistening black rock.

Bronson was the first to betray himself. Directly in his path an enormous gray boulder blocked further progress. Changing his course he skirted its edge, and looked back to see whether the others were following. Langtry was doubled up with laughter; Sellar stood stock still, waiting to see what Langtry would do before committing himself. Langtry straight-

ened up, walked straight into the boulder, emerged on the farther side, and rejoined Bronson.

"That is the most extraordinary thing I have seen yet in all of this," Bronson remarked when he could speak.

"There's nothing to it," Langtry remarked. "You just walk through. It's nothing but light. Try it yourself."

"I wasn't referring to the apparent solidity of the image. There's nothing new in that. But do you know what you just did just then?"

"No," Langtry admitted, somewhat crestfallen. "Except that I walked through the image. There was nothing to stop me."

"Why, man, you disappeared. When you walked into that boulder you vanished as if you had been annihilated. Then you suddenly materialized on the other side."

We had been so intent upon this conversation that we did not see the condensation of the panorama about us until it had risen to its full solifity of intense color. We found ourselves standing in a dry river bed of majestic distances. Our eyes quickly adjusted themselves to the natural scale of the vast panorama. A reasonable estimate of the breadth of the stony bed put it at twenty miles. We were almost exactly midway between the precipitous walls, which seemed to cut the blue-black sky miles over our heads.

The river bed was drenched in sunlight —no milder word can describe the stunning, all-pervading intensity of that withering light which beat down upon the tumbled boulders as if to stamp them flat in the gravel. Every particle of dust had been scoured from the dry bed by the rushing of innumerable torrents dumped into the gorges of the mountains for century after century of violent cloudbursts and unrestrained tempests from torrid seas.

Only the most brainless of reptiles would ever blunder into this blazing death trap. No mammal with the least glimmer of a dawning intelligence would ever gamble its life away against such odds smiting it in the eyes.

By an effort of the will we remembered where and what we were. But we could not restrain the instinctive habits of countless generations of intelligence and foresight bred into the very marrows of our bones. We stared apprehensively at the distant banks of the trap. Ten miles, or possibly nine by the shortest route, separated us from our one chance of escape. Could we make it, if suddenly we should see the torrent wheel round the slow curve of the river bed, a scant twenty-five miles away? Obviously not. We were as helpless as rats in a sewer.

"Let's get out of here," Bronson suggested, fingering at the muffler about his neck. "It's stuffy."

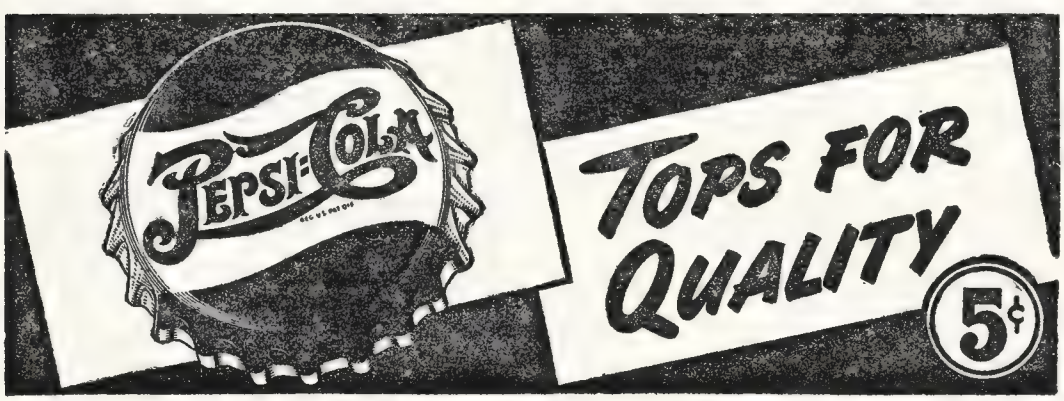
"We can't," Langtry reminded him, "unless one of us can find his way out of this maze and tell the engineers to alter the scale. I wouldn't undertake to get out inside of twelve hours on a bet. I know, because I tried last night."

"What's the difference?" Sellar spoke up. "Nothing material can happen. Keep your head and let whatever comes pass over you."

"I'll keep my head all right," Bronson retorted. He rewrapped the muffler tighter around his neck. "But what about my mind? Why didn't we choose a warmer day for this? Come on, I'm freezing. Anyone coming?" He glanced back. "I'm going to warm up at the rotunda."

"You think you are," Langtry chuckled, "Try it. Which way is south? We came north, you know."

Bronson did not deign to reply. We



followed at a safe distance. When put out Bronson could be quite explosive. Presently he stooped short. "What the devil's the matter with me? I must have walked five hundred yards, and I'm no nearer that bank than when I started. On the scale of this image we should be half way out of it by now."

"Perhaps the image condenses 'round you as you walk," Sellar suggested maliciously. "What you think is ten miles off is only a few hundred yards at most. The perspective does the trick. I shouldn't be surprised if all this moves more or less with us. That bank is just as far off in time as it would be if it were real. Langtry, suppose you lead us back?"

"I can't," Langtry confessed. "Once into an image of these dimensions you're lost. It is precisely as real, optically, as the original."

"Then how are we going to get back to the rotunda?" Bronson demanded. "Hang it! I wish we had chosen a cooler day. That infernal sun is baking me like a potato."

"Merely your eyes," Sellar reminded him. "I'm shivering. But at that I'm the one practical mind on the lot." He began shouting to the engineers to cut off the projection. Nothing happened. Langtry looked on with an amused smile.

"The boys won't hear you," he remarked. "They follow the racket of the electrons by means of head phones specially constructed to keep out all external noises. I told them to give us exactly sixty minutes of this. We've had about thirty."

THE remaining thirty minutes passed swiftly enough, for they were crowded with action. The excitement began when Bronson blundered into a sizeable, lizard-like reptile taking a siesta in the shade of a large blue boulder. The brute was a mere pigmy compared to some that we might equally well met. From the tip of its tail to its snout it measured probably nine feet, and in bulk it did not exceed a large calf.

With one yell Bronson vanished into the image of a blue boulder. Instinct kicked us in after him. We had merely sprung high and wide, not knowing where we should land. Our previous experience with solid images should have prepared us for the total darkness in which we found ourselves. For the moment we thought we had gone blind. We had merely leapt into a spot totally devoid of light.

"Let's be quiet," Langtry cautioned. "We don't want to waken the brute."

We walked round the boulder to the image of the sleeping reptile. It was sleeping the sleep of starved exhaustion. The stark ribs all but burst the drumtight, leathery hide of its thorax, and the dished-in pelvis was like that of a mummy. Yet the devil was not dead. The chest rose and fell like that of a man fighting off death.

The whole appearance of the sleeper was that of an incredibly old devil. Something about the glistening white teeth, sharper than a shark's, which the starved lips had bared, made us wish to kill the sleeping fiend. The utter irrationality of our murderous impulse could not check it; we were answering an instinct. Although none of us knew enough about the anatomy of such a reptile to have a competent opinion, we felt that at least two of those teeth were needles for the injection of venom. And we wondered what hapless creature this sleeping devil dreamed of in its starved exhaustion. Its dirty yellowish-green hide reeked of evil. We turned from it in disgust.

An ominous blue shadow was sliding over the distant north wall of the water course. Quickly it slipped down to the gravel bed and raced toward us. Glancing up we saw massive clouds, black as pitch, gathering above the chasm. The deluge was about to burst upon us. Instinct prevailed, and we started running toward the north wall, only to come to an embarrassed halt after a few yards. No one made any remark; we had all been tricked by our senses. We wished the engineers would have a breakdown with their infernal projectors.

"Let's sit down," Bronson suggested. "There can't be over fifteen minutes more of this torture." He carefully lowered himself to sit on a smooth boulder, when he remembered that it wasn't there in any material sense. Straightening up, he stared anxiously toward the distant bend in the river bed. "I feel something coming," he muttered. "Whatever comes, I'll not turn my back. I imagine there's a very considerable cloudburst coming down right now a few miles beyond that bend."

But the particular climax that we dreaded did not happen—at least it did not sweep on to its overwhelming finality while we retained our faculties. What if it had? Should we now be living?

Sellar saw it first. "The bend," he shouted. "Run!"

Twenty-five miles away a tumbling, flashing wall of water a quarter of a mile high wheeled round the bend and swept toward us. Bronson stood like a rock, staring at the rushing wall. True to his determination, he never flinched. Sellar stumbled off toward a high outcrop of black shale, and stopped, his back to the plunging flood. Langtry stood by Bronson, white faced and alert. What transpired next ran its course in less than a minute.

BETWEEN us and the rushing wall, two gigantic runners pelted down toward us over the gravel. Both were in the last stages of exhaustion. The roar of the pursuing flood, which of course we could not hear, urged them on to the last spark of their vitality. They reeled toward us, blind with brute fear. Of course they did not see us, although we stood directly in their path. As they lurched panting toward us we photographed every detail of their monstrous bodies on our eyes.

First the lumbering, three-toed splay feet, like those of a gigantic and awkward bird fascinated our attention. The shuffling rise and fall of those blundering feet spelled out the utter exhaustion of the runners in showers of scattered gravel. But the reeling brutes continued to cover the ground, twelve feet or more at a stride. The massive muscles of the legs contracted and expanded with the regularity of a well balanced machine.

Behind each runner the short, massive tail arched well over the gravel, maintaining the precarious balance of the lurching body as it strained forward to attain the limit of speed. The huge, baglike bellies sagged till they all but interfered with the piston motion of the legs, and each reptile, whether by purely mechanical reflexes or instinct, clutched frantically at the swaying obstruction in an effort to hold it up and free the legs. The hand clutching the belly was more plainly seen than the other, which sawed the air in clumsy arcs to aid the tail in balancing. That hand was grotesquely human. The sloping shoulders joined directly into the massive, columnar neck. All the hopeless struggle was pictured in the tense neck as thick as the body of an ox and rigid with great cables of muscle strained to the limit of endurance.

One of the runners began to outdistance the other. It forged swiftly ahead, urged by its keener senses as its body all but felt the ram of waters upon it. As it reeled by, the knee joint of one colossal leg passed well above the level of our heads, and we caught a vivid image of a blunt, flattened reptilian head thirty feet above us. That inadequate head with its compressed mouth snapped close shut like a turtle's beak, was a living portrait of a brainless stupidity animated by brute fear. A mere crested ridge of horny hide surmounted the staring reptilian eyes to contain whatever brain the lumbering creature possessed. Such a machine of ponderous bone and muscle could respond but slowly to external stimuli, and the momentum of any response would carry it far beyond the reasonable limit.

The laggard stumbled toward us, on the point of collapse, its strangely human arms whirling desperately and unavailingly to maintain a balance. The massive, stubby tail sank; the runner had lost his race. Death was upon him. Less than five miles behind the merciless deluge came trampling after him with the speed of a nightmare. But he was not to drown.

A shout from Sellar wheeled us sharply about. We thought at first that he was calling our attention to the faster runner, still pounding its ponderous way down the river bed. Then we saw the object of his consternation. The sleeping yellow devil beyond the boulder had roused itself, and was gathering all its dying strength for the supreme crime of its life. The clamor that we could not hear had broken the reptile's poisoned stupor. Crouching low like a cat about to spring on a bird, it glided toward the exhausted runner.

The doomed brute saw its enemy. All the life it was about to lose surged to its great heart. The massive muscles stiffened, the tail sprang up, and the sinews of the neck stood out like cables. Its two horribly human hands shot up to guard the softer flesh of the chin. The attacker was as a lizard to a crocodile beside the defender.

For the first time we apprehended the curious aspect of the defender's hands. Each had four stunted fingers and a thumb. But the thumb did not oppose the fingers as in a human hand; the brute could not have picked up so much as a club or a stone with its futile hand. Of what conceivable use could it be? Was it just another of nature's cruel jests?

We never learned the purpose of the stubby fingers. All that the ungainly hand was intended to be was concentrated in the thumb. This was the creature's weapon of defense, a murderous, overgrown, hornlike excrescence nearly two feet long and sharper than a stiletto.

The starving yellow devil crouched and leapt for the other's throat. It was a good leap, for one in the last stages of starvation, and the evil fangs found their mark. A shudder of intolerable pain convulsed the massive neck. Evidently the yellow devil was indeed venomous; even the brainless mass of bone and muscle felt the penetrating fire and sting of that venom. But it was a quick and merciful execution.

The great legs collapsed, and the creature tottered to its death. But in dying it shot one convulsed arm up to its head and spitted its slayer on the dagger-like thumb. A second more and the trampling water overwhelmed the dead and the dying.

All but Bronson turned instinctively to flee. Less then a second. . . .

"How's that?" It was one of the technicians shouting from the rotunda. The sixty minutes were up. We tried to shout back, and choked.

"Oh, this blessed, solid concrete," Sellar sighed, as he sat down on the floor of the arena and pressed it hard with both hands.

CHAPTER II

THE LOTUS EATERS

EVEN the earliest successes with the televisor were not hit or miss shots in the dark of a forgotten past. As the engineers became more proficient in the technique of analysing, they saw clearly that every apparently trivial incident fitted into one superb picture of a vanished epoch. And as they progressed, they perceived that all the histories they deciphered were records of a conflict between two great races. One of these early split into two hostile factions and warred upon its own kind. Finally, both factions were exterminated by a fourth combatant whom they had overlooked, and before whose irresistible strength they perished, while the nimbler third party fled to safety.

We who followed the unrolling of the histories conceived a new respect for an old doctrine—that of the four "elements", earth, air, fire and water. Our modern, sophisticated knowledge recognizes none of these as an "element", except as a metaphor. Our more imaginative ancestors went to the root of the matter and put their finger on the eternal tetrad of destruction.

If our parvenu race vanquishes the "invincible four", as we came to call the major protagonists of the conflict, it will be the first in the history of the world to do so. But, as has been pointed out by Sellar, who is something of an historian, nature seldom repeats herself. The particular weapon she has reserved for us is probably of a totally different calibre than that which sufficed for the vast, brainless and near-brainless hordes whose decline we witnessed.

Measured against the ages of that forgotten struggle, the whole slow rise of our race from brutehood to manhood is as a second to a day. So perhaps it is premature to make predictions from the records we saw. We, after all, may have it in us to win.

Bronson, who is a practical man with a tinge of pessimism, thinks we shall lose. Intelligence, he believes, is the subtle weapon which nature has reserved for our undoing. However, as he says this only after he has had a bad night, the rest of those who saw the records discount it to zero and predict the exact opposite—as does Bronson himself when he is feeling fit. Anyhow, as Sellar remarks, it was a good show, and we shall have done our part if we can put on one half as entertaining.

As there was little in all the records that could justly be called a picture of lazy peace and contentment, I shall give the one that qualifies in this respect more than its due share of space. The finishing touch to the picture may be disregarded if desired; in fact the assemblers have suggested that it be cut from the completed record. But as Sellar insists that the cut be not made in the interests of historical accuracy and fidelity to nature, I shall leave the record intact.

This particular episode was followed from the roof of the rotunda. We thus obtained an unobstructed view of the whole panorama. Behind us stretched the milky blue placidity of a vast lake or fresh water inland sea. Vision set no limit to the expanse. We might have been gazing out over one of our own Great Lakes, except for the peculiar chalky appearance of the water. Directly opposite us in the other direction, and about a hundred yards distant at the nearest point, the almost level shore line ran for league after league to the limit of seeing.

The shallow water between us and the shore was the scene of the afternoon idyll of the lotus eater, as we named the happy, harmless creature enjoying himself beneath the sunny ripples. The afternoon was one of those flawless fragments of

eternity which we remember for a lifetime. Time seemed to stand still against the motionless masses of white cumulus clouds piled mountain high around the horizon, and the lush reeds in the boundless marshes shone with an unforgettable, quiet green, unstirred by the passing of any breeze. Even the ordinarily drab mud of the shoreline dividing the marshlands from the water was a band of delicate violet like another, softer sky, in which the stately masses of the clouds shone as in a mirror of infinite depth.

We waited.

WHEN the image first condensed we saw no living creatures. Their presence however was recorded in the spoors criss-crossing the mud of the shoreline in all directions. Having adjusted the perspective, we got the true scale and made a rough estimate of the size of some of those fresh footprints. The deepest of them could easily have accommodated a large wash tub. From that they ranged down to mere pockets the size of a teacup.

Following out one of the larger spoors, we easily deduced the kind of monster which had made the tracks. Whatever its

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usual habit, it had lumbered along on all four feet over the mud, letting its enormous tail drag. Once in its slow journey it had rested on its belly. The outline of the roughly oval depression could have embraced the bulk of four cows without undue crowding.

Where were the inhabitants of this lush paradise? We guessed them to be off in the tall reeds gorging themselves into insensibility. Our guess was only partly right. The first inhabitant appeared from a totally unexpected quarter. The surface of the water all round our rotunda was completely covered by dense masses of some aquatic plant with fleshy green leaves and large, lily-like scarlet blossoms. If we had stopped to think we should have realized that this flaming cress would make an ideal salad for frequenters of mud flats.

Langtry was admiring the gently rising and falling mantle of scarlet when suddenly he gave a violent start.

"Am I seeing things? There it is again—quick!"

The scarlet water weeds were thrust aside, and a bland, expressionless face the size of a bathtub beamed up at us with a welcoming smile of complete and amiable imbecility. To say that the face smiled is an exaggeration. A smile presupposes at least the rudiments of a central nervous system. There was none behind that vast, flat, vacuous face. The huge slit of the tight-lipped mouth, slightly tilted at the corners, did however give the empty face a semblance of intelligence to which it was not entitled. Even the surly countenance of the dullest hippopotamus would have sparkled with vivacity beside that vacant dishpan of a face.

The lidless pig eyes opened to their fullest extent, the slit of a mouth became less compressed, and the stupid face opened to the sky in an abysmal yawn. It was the most perfect expression of indolence imaginable, and we furtively covered our own sympathetic imitations.

The red chasm into which we peered was as innocent of teeth as the mouth of a mud sucker. A bony ridge along the gums might conceal degenerated teeth for all we could see. But if so, the teeth were too tired to cut through. We marvelled that such a mass of laziness could command energy enough to breathe and keep alive. Probably its too bulky ancestors had taken to the shallow waters in order to float and save their legs the fatigue of supporting inert tons of superfluous flesh.

The gaping mouth closed, apparently of its own weight, for the sluggish creature seemed to lack the energy for even so simple an act. For some moments the huge flat head floated lazily among the scarlet blossoms, rising and falling listlessly on the gentle swell.

We thought the beast had gone to sleep. But it had not. It was merely trying to make up what passed for its mind whether or not it was hungry. At last it decided. Feeding time had come again. The flat head seemed to open six or eight inches like a split pie, and very slowly it began to glide over the water, skimming off the cress. As that efficient natural skimmer slid over the surface of the water, a perfectly straight path four feet wide and twenty feet long was swept clean of the floating plants. Not so much as a single fleshy leaf or one scarlet petal eluded the scoop. That mouthful alone, sucked down into the creature's invisible interior as fast as it was skimmed, must have weighed at least a ton. We thought it enough, but we underestimated the beast's capacity for food.

FOR perhaps two minutes the head rested on the water at the end of the lane it had swept. Then, with exasperating deliberation, it was withdrawn to the starting point. If enjoying a meal was no more exciting than those loutish movements seemed to indicate, we wondered why the sluggish beast bothered to feed itself at all. It would have required less effort to drown in peace.

Again the head rested, this time for over five minutes. Once more the flat face split open just wide enough to take in the plants, and again a twenty foot lane was skimmed clean. Another ton of unnourishing vegetation disappeared into the invisible interior. Surely it should now be satisfied. But the meal had barely started. Fifteen tons or more of the flimsy stuff vanished before the feeder desisted. It stopped, apparently, merely because it had skimmed the water almost clean in the semicircle it could reach without budging on the muddy bottom. What it could reach by merely extending its neck was the natural limit of its ambition.

"That thing hasn't the brains of a worm," Sellars remarked disgustedly. "By the way, where's the rest of it? We've only seen the head, and by inference the neck. There must be a body floating somewhere nearby to absorb all that fodder."

"Not necessarily," Langtry objected. "I

Only the birds made the journey out of the volcanic turmoil.

shouldn't be surprised to find the bulk of this beast in the next county. They seem to have gone in for size in the good old days."

"Bigger and stupider lummoxes," Bronson added. He seemed to dislike the harmless creature whose face alone we had seen so far. "Living on salad like that it must be as flabby as a dead cod. I wish there were some way of making it move."

As if in response to his wish, a huge ripple moved out from the base of the rotunda and sped out to the floating plants. The main bulk of the monster was hidden by the rotunda. There being no way of shifting the centre of the image, we had to wait patiently till the beast floated into view.

It did not hurry; it merely drifted. A slate colored island bobbed up slowly and moved toward the muddy beach. This was the creature's rump. The smooth hide looked like rubber. There was not a protective wart or scale anywhere on that vulnerable, open expanse. Small wonder the beast was in no hurry to wade ashore. The devil only knew what might be lurking in the towering reeds. Certainly that defenseless mass of flesh did not. Otherwise it would have taken to the water for good and have abandoned the atavistic attempt to be half a land animal. Possibly the rubbery hide was tougher than it looked, but we had our doubts. We had seen some pretty sharp teeth in contemporary records.

The sluggish wader slowly approached the shore, and its body emerged from the water. The twenty foot neck now rose stiffly from the water, elevating the head like a periscope. To our intense surprise the massive flat head now turned twice slowly through an arc of nearly 180 degrees. The great beast had sharper instincts than we had given it credit for. It was spying out off the coast before going ashore. Apparently satisfied with its observations, the wader proceeded.

From our vantage point on the roof of the rotunda we had a somewhat better view of the marshes than was possible to the wary reptile. Had we been consulted we should have counselled watchful waiting. Yet we had observed a suspicious tremor pass over the top of one lush thicket of reeds.

To give any adequate idea of the enormous bulk of that vegetarian reptile as it appeared when it finally floundered onto the beach is difficult. We judged that its total length exceeded that of two freight cars. The awkward rump, the highest part of the beast, would easily have overtopped the largest locomotive.

What use the clumsy tail might be we could not fathom. It began nowhere in particular as a meaningless prolongation of the creature's vast hinder parts, and tapered out to a blunt nub sixty feet behind. We could not believe that the listless encumbrance of flabby flesh dragging in the mud had ever been used as a weapon of defense. There was not a ripple of hard, healthy muscle anywhere down its whole, futile length; it was nothing but an unnecessary parody of a vigorous tail. Nature had endowed her offspring with the hugest tail in history. The recipient might do with it what he pleased. It was no longer any concern of hers.

As a final, crowning piece of irony, the useless tail was nearly three times as long as the inadequate neck. To have made a reasonable job of her idiotic masterpiece, nature should have stuck the head on the end of the tail, as indeed one famous paleontologist did when he articulated the skeleton of a similar monster. Then the sluggish brute would have had a not utterly inadequate periscope.

VIEWING that imbecilic jest, Bronson suddenly lost what remained of his respect for natural law as manifested in living matter. If, he declared, nature has a purpose in evolution, that purpose is wholly sinister. A half-witted child of sadistic tendencies could not be so stupidly cruel as to devise a meaningless, helpless monstrosity like that poor brute shuffling along the beach. Sellar calmed him by pointing out that the creature probably enjoyed life in its own simple way, and got more happiness out of it than the most complex human being ever has imagined. After all, it had evidently relished its late dinner.

Feeding did indeed seem to be the monster's only function. Dragging the useless tail laboriously after it, the sluggish reptile squashed its way over the mud flats to the reeds. Reaching a lush clump, it extended its neck, tilted the flat head sideways, and began to feed gluttonously on the tender tops. Such watery stuff would have to be sucked down by the ton lot to furnish sufficient heat to keep the mountain of flesh alive. A vegetarian the size of this beast must spend all of its waking hours in feeding. Here again nature had gone the limit. There was no denying that the feeding machine was efficient. The vast creature

epitomized the final and complete confusion between eating to live and living to eat.

Feeling the need of roughage to digest the bale of fodder it gulped down unchewed, the beast began ripping at the thicker stalks of the reeds. We looked on in silent apprehension. The utter defenselessness of the feeder had won us over to its side, and we did wish it would show a flicker of common sense. The inviting slimness of the unprotected neck filled us with dread for an accident that might easily happen down there near the roots.

The insatiable feeder moved forward a few feet over the space it had cleared into the thicket. As this spot the reeds were less dense, and it was possible to catch glimpses of an enchanting bayou just beyond the sheltering screen. Enormous orange lilies floated on the brown water. Evidently these were a special delicacy, for our friend greedily thrust his head through the sparse reeds and began skimming off the largest. He advanced a yard or two and stopped—quite suddenly.

The huge body bounded twenty feet into the air as if electrified, and smacked down on the mud with an impact that shook the beach and sent long ripples scudding over the lake. The writhing neck flashed up and out of the reeds, spraying them with torrents of blood like water from a fire hose.

The hapless creature had lost its head. Some efficient devil lurking beneath the water lilies had severed the neck about two feet below the head at one snap.

The creature did not immediately expire. Its last moments recapitulated the whole tragedy of its inhibited instincts and its inherited futilities. The loss of its head did not incapacitate the blundering machine of bone and flabby flesh. So far as intelligence was concerned the dying reptile was almost precisely as it had been before the accident. As most of us were aware, the monster's main nervous system was concentrated in the rump, above the haunches, and conveniently near the tail. Whatever coordinated the slow movements of the legs was probably distributed all along the spinal column. All of this now came into violent action. The severance of the head had jarred the whole body into one supreme effort to live.

Showing a speed it never could have been capable of while uninjured, the dying monster bounded over the beach in terrific leaps that shook the lake, drenching the mud with the last of its life. Instinct, resident in its ganglia, urged it to the water. Twice it smashed belly down on the scarlet cress thirty feet from the shore, only to rebound as if made of rubber, and plunge its writhing withers deep into the mud. The crimsoned wash of its desperate plunges surged over the dying creature, bathing it in its own blood. It lay where it had fallen, twitching convulsively.

"Pretty fierce," Bronson muttered. "Damn nature."

"It's not over yet," Sellar remarked. "Here comes the murderer, or the appointed instrument of fate, or evolution, or whatever you want to call him. Engaging devil, isn't he?"

To have wrought the irreparable havoc which he had done, the executioner was strangely undersized and insignificant. What he lacked in size he made up in grotesque repulsiveness. He emerged from the reed screen walking erect.

There was not much to him but jaws, sagging belly and hind legs. The forelegs were mere vestiges of what might once have been powerful arms weaponed with ruthless talons. They flipped against the

palpitating wrinkles of his throat in a disgusting parody of lighthearted, jaunty dandyism. He was tripping out to dinner and he was in a merry, mischievous mood.

His total height, had he held his broad snout vertical instead of horizontal, might have reached that of a very tall man; certainly it was not over seven feet. Fully three feet of him was absorbed in the powerful jaws, still red with the insignia of their victory. Head joined belly without the intermediary of a neck. From his horny armor we judged that he too spent most of his days and nights in blind terror of his life. Probably he quarrelled with his friends when easier food was scarce.

For the moment however he was in good humor. He minced daintily toward his prospective meal. Others no doubt would soon join him, but for the moment, he, the victor, would enjoy the choicest spoils of his valor.

What followed caused Bronson to modify slightly his somewhat harsh verdict on natural mercy and justice. The balance was partially restored—when he could do the injured party neither harm nor good. Still, it was restored.

The executioner, being, a reptile himself, should have remembered that it takes many, many hours for his kind to die completely, especially when the victim is of vast proportions. But, being a reptile half of whose body was belly, and half jaws to rend flesh in sufficient quantities to appease the constant voracity of his hunger, the executioner was incapable of remembering anything. The inherited experience of his forefathers had not yet registered on his rudimentary instincts.

The luscious softness of the quivering tail attracted the feaster first. For a second or two he stood erect, contemplating the prospective banquet. Then, opening his huge jaws to their fullest extent, he plunged in, about six feet from the tapered tip. The cruel, incurved teeth ripped at the flesh like sabres. Although the dying tail quivered excessively, the feaster managed to tear out a huge gobble of smoking meat. He stepped back and raised his enormous jaws skyward, like a bird drinking, the better to swallow the morsel.

All the vestigial instincts of the dying monster awoke once more before they died forever, and the posterior brain remembered its functions. A last reflex contraction of the flabby tail muscles sufficed. Just as the executioner swallowed, his belly was driven clear through his backbone by the terrific impact of twenty tons of outraged, dying flesh.

AS THE technicians have been largely responsible for the selection of records in this series, I shall follow their preference and describe only those which have an unmistakable reference to their special hero Belshazzar. To understand his history it is necessary to consider several broader records in which he played no part. These have been carefully chosen by the technicians from the complete series, of which they form only a very small sample.

For many weeks we had been puzzled by the frequent recurrence of one type of record which seemed to have no particular bearing on the history we were striving to unravel. We first observed it incidentally in the episode of the decapitated vegetarian. This was the peculiar milkiness of the lake water. Thereafter in scores of records we encountered the same inexplicable feature—boundless inland seas whose placid waters invariably were as turbid as dirty milk.

A racial improvement in the technique of projecting the televisor records was necessary before the riddle of the lakes was solved. The scale of what we were trying to decipher was evidently vast, both in space and in time. The mere extent of the lakes offered no difficulty; the time factor seemed to present an insuperable obstacle. This was finally overcome in a ridiculously simple manner, suggested by the similar problem in motion pictures.

The history of years, of centuries, and perhaps even of thousands of centuries had to be condensed and reproduced in a sequence which the human eye could follow clearly in a total exposure of only a few seconds or minutes, or at the most two hours. The record of a longtime event was simply speeded up, like the moving picture of, say, an opening rosebud.

Such was the simple solution suggested by experience and common sense. Unfortunately it did not work. The speeded records turned out as confused gray blurs of swirling fog, in which no detail was visible. These disappointing records were obtained by letting the exploring needle of monochromatic light play continuously for several days on a specimen—crystal or fossil—instead of for a matter of minutes or hours.

The cause of the trouble was so simple that the rankest amateur should have foreseen the difficulty before the experi-

ment of long exposures was ever attempted. The exploring needle was not at fault. It understood the commonest fact of everyday life better than did the engineers—the fact that a night is always interposed between two consecutive days. The needle analysed the hours of daylight and then superposed a blank corresponding to the unstimulated motion of the electrons during the night-long absence of light.

Once that elementary fact was grasped, it was a straight-forward problem in laboratory mechanics to devise the proper automatic shutter of interrupter to filter out the nights and leave the recorder open to the days. This of course was no crude mechanical contrivance of diaphragms like a cameral shutter. The fastest camera shutter ever made would have been quite useless. The actual device finally used with complete success was a battery of delicately balanced selenium cells—a hint the engineers got from the astronomers.

The first test of the interrupter was made on the lake of the lotus eater. By speeding up the recording, the technicians restored the history of approximately ten thousand years in a total exposure of two hours. At such a speed no details of life were visible; we saw only the milky expanse of the lake and its muddy shore line.

Again the image was unsatisfactory. This time the difficulty was spotted at once. A slower shutter was devised to filter out the sunless days, whether the absence of full sunlight was due to a mere cloudy day or two or to a whole winter season. This improvement produced entirely satisfactory records, until a third, vaster-scale obstacle of perfection, which will be described later, gradually blurred the records in a most puzzling way.

THE history of that first ten-thousand-year stretch when accelerated to a one hour record for exhibition presented a singularly restful picture after some of the ruthless violence we had witnessed. The cloudiness of the water dissolved, and the lake changed from a milky blue opal to a transparent aquamarine. So clear was the water that we saw the chalky floor of the lake at a depth of hundreds of feet as clearly as if we were looking through a lens.

The speed of the recording was so great that of course we could make out no minor details. But we saw much, some of which puzzled us. Whatever action might be taking place, we observed only as the gradual shading of some vast patch of red into a softer expanse of russet, or as the mazy interplay of irregular patterns of color that seemed to meet, interpenetrate, and separate, both transformed into more intricate mosaics of color. The slow changes which we witnessed actually were flashing by at the rate of about a hundred and seventy years of real, historical time for each second of the projected image.

The technicians continued to run the analyser at the same prodigious speed for eighteen hours longer, thus restoring the history of about ninety thousand years after the water of the lake first became transparent, giving a total run of one hundred thousand years.

Through all that ninety thousand years we detected no variation in the quality of the water. It remained as clear and as transparent as a flawles crystal. Nor could we observe any significant change in the sweep of the shore line beyond a slight rhythmic advance and recession, as the image recorded the periodic recurrence of long stretches of exceptional drought followed by more abundant rain-falls for perhaps a millenium or two. Beyond that slow, regular breathing of the sleeping waters we observed nothing worth recording.

Continuing the exposure slightly beyond the hundred thousand year mark on the scale, we noticed that the water of the lake was again growing turbid. The milkiness reappeared first on the colorful floor of the lake. Before following this history further, we reset the analyser and sampled the hundred thousand years at every thousandth year mark all down the long record. These samples were slowed down to the speed where visibility of details fell just within the powers of the human eye.

The living panoramas were of course still greatly accelerated at this threshold of speed, but they sufficed for our purpose. We wished merely to see what happened to the tribe of lotus eaters in a stretch of one hundred thousand years. As there were ninety-nine such sample records, it is out of the question to report on the whole series. One or two specimens must suffice.

The first significant change appeared when the waters of the lake finally cleared —about the ten thousand year mark. In the slower record we noticed that the huge wading reptiles were now venturing out into the water much farther than they had previously dared.

Bronson suggested a plausible explanation for this apparent increase in boldness:

all of those reptiles which were incapable of long absences from the land had fallen prey to the rapacious flesh eaters lurking in the marshes. Only those with the capacities for keeping themselves floating and comfortable for considerable periods without having to return to the beach eluded their enemies long enough to have a reasonable chance of reaching maturity. The offspring of this better adapted breed inherited their parents' superiorities of lung and muscle, and made it increasingly difficult for the flesh eater to earn a substantial living.

Sellar pointed out that the flesh eaters had probably not been idle in the meantime. Only the offspring of the wariest, most voracious, strongest and quickest devils of the tribe would be able to come through the lean centuries unscathed. Their race was now probably a marvel of Spartan endurance and modern efficiency. The balance had not been destroyed; the conflict had merely grown fiercer and the competition keener.

Wishing to see something of the facts and check up on facile theorizing, we stepped down the projections to a more easily followed speed. The effect was at first ludicrous in the extreme, as the action was still transpiring at about twenty times the natural rate at which it had actually happened. The transparent waters of the lake for five or six miles from the shoreline teemed with enormous monsters skimming the scarlet weeds with frantic industry, or darting like electrified swans, their periscopes elevated in tense alertness, from one field to another of the watery pasture.

A stiff breeze freshened far out on the lake, rippled the surface of the water, and blew in vast beds of cress from the inexhaustible supply blanketing the deeper waters. Sensing the breeze, the paddlers faced it, impatiently waiting the arrival of fresh fodder.

The epoch was evidently one of unprecedented abundance. To keep abreast of the unlimited food supply, the huge feeding machines had increased their bulk to the very limit fixed by the laws of mechanics. Ten centuries more of such inexhaustible stores of low grade nourishment, and the huge consumers would be unable to support their own weight on dry land. They must inevitably take to the water permanently to keep from collapsing of their own massiveness. But nature, as we were to see presently, had not yet decided to evolve the whales—or their equivalent, for the whales took to the water down another channel. For the time being, wind and weather conspired to glut the champion vegetable feeders of all time with an excess of food which they had not the wit to refuse.

Along the muddy shore the greatly accelerated action also presented a ludicrous parody of animated vivacity. The ungainly monsters shuffled busily hither and thither like gigantic rats, thrusting their snaky necks into the reed thickets from time to time, or browsing with feverish haste on the succulent tops. Now and then a glutted feeder would lurch back to the water like a runaway locomotive and plunge in. The absence of the prodigious splash which we anticipated only made the scene more ridiculous. Even the greatly accelerated projection could not create a splash where the deliberate beast itself was too indolent to lift its lumbering feet more than six inches out of the mud. But the ripple which the monster set up would have done credit to a freighter.

WE WERE beginning to think the lotus eaters utterly incapable of anything but feeding when a lucky chance, just below the three thousand year mark of the record, shot up a comedy which revised our estimate. Probably the episode was a mere accident, the sort of happy chance that occurs only once or twice in a hundred thousand years—like tossing heads twenty times consecutively with an honest coin. Given time enough, any event not sheerly impossible is as likely as not to happen. But we had no wish to disparage the lotus eaters. We agreed to give at least one of them full credit for his apparent exhibition of intelligence, although not one of those who observed the great beasts really believes that a single giant of the lot had the wits of a worm.

The scene was that of early morning. For fully three miles from the shore the water was bare of cress. Either the gluttonous reptiles had pumped the entire week's supply into their vast bags, or an unfavorable wind had blown it all far out beyond the reach of even the most daring waders. The whole population resident in that section was ashore, greedily browsing on the reeds, or cavorting—under the greatly accelerated rate of projection—in ungainly evolutions on the mud.

Where was the enemy? Why did he not take advantage of the bountiful windfall right on his own doorstep? Could he possibly be overawed by a mere display of

numbers? Not he surely, with his invincible superiority of jaw and sabre teeth, to say nothing of his all but impenetrable armor of horny plates.

The enemy was not bluffed by the impressive concentration of the lotus eaters. But he was a cowardly sort of reptile in spite of his superior armament, and he would take no chances. Not until his victims were delivered practically bound and helpless to his jaws would he venture to attack. Chance—or stupidity—gave the enemy his chance, and he seized it immediately.

One enormous feeder had lurched away from the main herd on its way to the water. It was glutted, and moved even more sluggishly than usual. Instantly five of the enemy darted from the reeds and made at top speed for the isolated monster. Like grotesque, squat crocodiles they raced erect over the mud on their stout hind legs, flipping their feeble hands in anticipatory ecstasy, their murderous horny jaws already agape to their widest. This was to be a quick victory and an easy banquet.

Chancing to turn its head sideways, the helpless monstrosity of flabby flesh saw the enemy coming. The five raced over the mud in a compact squad. Their objective, curiously enough was not the defenceless neck, but awkward, upstanding rump. Not till long afterwards did we comprehend the full significance of that instinctive but nevertheless intelligent strategy. The rump certainly was vulnerable enough, but the neck, we should have guessed, would be an even safer place to attack.

What the intended victim now automatically did avenged the murder of its helpless fellow creature—thousands of years before. Like a mechanical toy operated by surprising springs, the startled monster sprang straight up off the mud, partly by reflex action of its flabby tail, partly by the equally automatic action of the shoulder muscles. The vertical leap shot the huge body up a good fifteen feet. When gravity brought it down again with an impact that jarred every monster on the beach, the five fierce attackers vanished. Their too eager momentum had carried them directly under the ponderous creature's enormous belly, distended and stodged as it was with tons of undigested vegetation.

For some minutes the unconscious victor squatted in the mud incapable of motion. It was paralyzed with fright. Probably it

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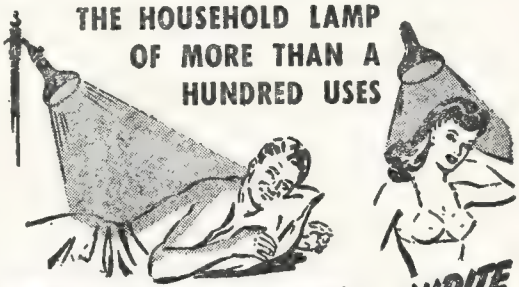

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just brooded in the mud in helpless resignation to the momentatily expected slash and rip of the sabre teeth. It might have continued to squat there till the wash of the lake buried its bones in the mud of centuries, had not the precipitate retreat of its own kind roused it to sluggish motion. Terrified by the unprecedented leap of their fellow monster, and urged into motion by the subsequent jarring of the mud flats, all were lumbering toward the water as fast as their stunted legs would take them.

The paralyzed victor instinctively got to its feet and followed the herd. As it rose we saw the five attackers, their vicious jaws still agape, reposing in their last sleep. Squashed flat in the mud they offered a perfect museum exhibit to be exhumed and chipped out of the rock millions of years later by some ingenious paleontologist. If ever we see that particular group of five in a museum we shall know where it came from, and how five complete warriors all happened to be caught together in the same attitude of arrested flight. The hind legs of all five were extended as if still straining forward to the limit of speed. Even Sellar, usually so sympathetic, could find no softer epitaph than "serve the vicious brutes right."

Having witnessed this unique example of prehistoric justice, we were loath to tempt our luck by searching for another. Accordingly we speeded up the record and passed directly to the hundred and ten thousand year mark. The water of the lake was again growing turbid, but slowly. Then, suddenly, so great was the speed of the record, the whole lake flashed out in a vast sheet of slate gray. The technicians cut off the projection in order to carry the analysis forward half a million years.

FOR many days our attempts to decipher the resulting record failed. Nothing clearer than vast smudges of impenetrable black blotting out all but small, irregular patches of gray rewarded our patience, and we began to think the specimens being analyzed must be defective. The device of systematic sampling at long intervals gave nothing better. The technicians were on the point of discarding the whole record as a failure when a chance projection, thrown up at random, gave the clue, and the entire record was carefully tabulated for future detailed analysis as being probably one of the most spectacular yet obtained.

In that luckly accident of black smudges instantly flamed up into blinding crimson and orange. The projector was stopped down immediately, and we proceeded to explore the ten years on either side of the reading minutely.

Ten years before the moment of crimson and orange the lake appeared as a vast uniform expanse of chalky water. Slowing down the speed, we observed a chain of lazy vortices, like enormous millraces, churning the turbid surface for mile after mile in an almost straight course roughly parallel to the shoreline. The troubled water began far beyond the range of vision behind us, and continued to the horizon in the opposite direction.

The comparatively calm water between the whirlpools and the shore still teemed with unwieldy monsters, although the scarlet cress had disappeared completely. Wisps of fog drifted shoreward from the troubled water, yet those innocent leviathans continued to wade and splash in the tepid waters without the slightest apprehension of impending danger. The gentle heat which had warmed their bath to the point of luxury, and which had killed no inconsiderable part of their food supply, conveyed no threat to their grateful bodies. Doubtless they had gradually adapted themselves to the longer foraging journeys into the marshes now necessary, as by imperceptible degrees the temperature of the lake rose and killed the floating cress.

The agelong transformation which had changed the transparent waters of the lake to thin, tepid mud had stolen upon the monsters so slowly that it now fitted their needs as the old order could not have done. Cold blooded reptiles originally, they had welcomed the beneficent heat as a gift from heaven. They now had an unfailing refuge from the miseries of cloudy days and inclement winters. The long journeys to the marshes for fodder were somewhat of a bore, but they were not without their good points, for they stimulated the appetite and eliminated those with weak legs. This race on the whole was a better one than its predecessor, even if it did spend much of its life in warm mud.

The paradise of those trusting sybarites suddenly became a red hell. By careful experiments the technicians sueceeded in locating the precise moment of the transformation, and were therefore enabled to project it in full detail in the arena. The scale in space was greatly reduced to enable us to get most of the picture in one

seeing. We had looked for the eruption to burst through the floor of the lake along the line of whirlpools, but we were disappointed. A more active fault under the floor of the lake far below the horizon, went into action centuries before ours did —if indeed ours ever erupted.

The whole horizon burst into a fury of orange and crimson fire. Before we could count five the solid wall of flame had overwhelmed a full third of the sky. This was no solitary volcano erupting from the floor of the lake; the crust of the earth had cracked and split asunder for hundreds of miles, letting the pentup fountains of incandescent lava gush skyward in a deluge of flaming rock and iron.

The spectacle ended as abruptly as it began. Steam billowing up in vast clouds from the vaporized depths of the lake obscured the curtained fire behind an impenetrable pall.

Then came the climax which we should have foreseen, but which none of us anticipated. The terrific concussion of the explosion, travelling through the water with prodigious speed, struck the bodies of the reptiles in the shallows like the recoil of a gigantic gun, killing them instantly.

It was some minutes before the following tidal wave leapt over the horizon and bore down on the floating bodies, a swiftly rolling mountain of glassy black water. In one tremendous surge it lifted the dead multitude and hurled it far back over the marshes.

A second wave toppled over the horizon, racing to overtake the first. For a second it seemed to hesitate, as if gathering momentum for the onslaught on the land. Then it suddenly flattened as it ceased to advance. The shallow waters, augmented by the surge and ebb of the first wave, instantly steepened, dipping backwards toward the depths. Like water being emptied from a flat dish, the waters of the lake from shore line to horizon slipped over the tilted floor and disappeared. The whole lake was being drained over the brink of some chasm beyond range of our vision.

Shifting the incidence of the analyser, we explored the marshes. Along the high water mark, twenty miles or more from the shoreline, left by the recession of the first wave, a tumbled shambles of gigantic bodies stretched for league after league to the limit of seeing. Mingled with the huge bodies were numberless carcasses of their enemies. All this useless driftwood tossed aside in the gesture of a second was the sum total of half a million years' meaningless struggle for survival.

But was it all without meaning? The wave had retreated after dumping the bodies. Beyond the highwater mark a hungering population still clamored for food. Nature fed them generously. Already they were scurrying to the banquet.

STILL striving to understand the character of their hero, Belshazzar, the technicians analysed specimen after specimen in an effort to place him properly against the background of appalling wastage which produced him. Perhaps this way of looking at his career throws him into a false perspective. But if so, it is at least as true as the estimate we form of any of the more notorious heroes of our own race.

The record which follows was assembled from the analysis of nearly thirty specimens, each of which contributed its images to the whole in an orderly sequence. That the separate records were indeed parts of one consecutive action was proved by the overlapping of episodes.

This record is of peculiar interest in the history of the televisor. For the first time the fossil of a flying creature was used as one of the specimens in the analysis. The fossil was not that of a bird, but of a winged reptile. Only the impression of a fragment of one membrane was used. The mud in which the creature had left its impression to harden into stone with the lapse of millions of years had absorbed the decaying organic matter of the membrane, thus preserving the atoms required in the analysis.

The atoms of that prehistoric flyer's batlike wing had recorded hundreds of epics of land, air and water. To unravel these will be a task for an entire generation of patient decipherers. In the present record the assemblers used only an occasional fleeting fragment, to verify that widely separated parts of the record were indeed related. What the wing recorded in an hour's flight would have been physically impossible for any stationary object, say a mass of crystal in the face of a cliff, to have "observed" by the impact of direct or scattered light. In subsequent recordings free use was made of the remains of wings—insects', reptiles', and those of great seagoing birds.

Sellar, who is aiding me by his critical remarks, insists that I include here a brief historical note before describing the

record. He says this is necessary in the interests of historical accuracy. Bronson doubts this, for he has never believed that history has the slightest claim to accuracy. So far as he has been able to discover, history is largely an exposition of historians' personal tastes, which are frequently antagonistic to his own. However, he asks me to comply with Sellar's wish.

First, Sellar declares, the epoch we were restoring gives a rather unfair picture of nature. We saw her at her worst, from our narrowly human point of view. The most terrible fighters of prehistoric times graced—or disgraced—the scene, which was one of insane overproduction, ruthless competition, and merciless conflicts. Reptile warred upon reptile with an appalling and utterly brainless ferocity. What might they not have done, endowed with reason?

As it was, they did pretty well. More efficient weapons of attack were continually met by more adequate means of defense, until only the fittest could hope to survive. When the defensive armament became too cumbersome the defenders simply faded from the scene, bankrupt by their own inordinate expenditures of horn, bone, muscle and energy in preparation for the expected attack—which never came, because they were in fact impregnable.

The enemy in the meantime also collapsed, largely because the enormous quantities of flesh which he required to keep his magnificent offensive armament in fighting trim had disappeared. For this famine his own rapacious aggressiveness was wholly responsible. Those whom he could not kill and devour he drove to such an excess of armoured security that they perished of their own preparedness. To say that all this is but another instance of the survival of the fittest is, Sellar declares, a grotesque lie, as none survived. Rather, he insists, it was the total extinction of the fit.

On another score also, according to Sellar, the record is unfair to nature. The experts whom we consulted on the interpretation of records agreed that we were analyzing one of the three or four periods of greatest natural activity in the earth's history—what the geologists call a revolution. We chanced, as it were, to spy on nature in one of her grand rages. Our ridiculously young race has never seen the like, and probably never will. By the time the next revolution reshapes our continents and oceans we shall have departed, or at least have lost all memory of our race as we now conceive it.

In the epoch of our records, not only did life war upon life with a ruthlessness for which our race can show no parallel, unless it be from recent times, but also the inanimate crust of the earth tore itself asunder in a suicidal frenzy as if utterly weary of all the teeming life it had brought forth. All nature's forces of destruction were hurled into action. What tempests could not uproot, fire destroyed, and what fire could not abolish, water submerged. Our race has not had to endure this.

So much for Sellar's apology. Bronson asks me to add that nature needs none, so far as we are concerned. I proceed with the records.

Mountain, desert, and jungle contributed their parts to the action. The first projection in the arena threw up a scene with which we were now familiar—that of a sun-smitten, parched wilderness of sand and glaring rock. In our own time we should expect such a treeless, roasting waste to be a breeding place for reptiles, and we should usually be right, provided sustenance was not too far away.

AS WE picked our way over the blazing desolation—so real was the image that we shed our coats, although the morning was sharp—we instinctively kept a lookout for eggs, and soon found them. The whole desert was a vast rookery or breeding ground of the heat-loving reptiles. Their eggs were abundant enough, but where were the reptiles? Probably a hundred miles away. The eggs could get on well enough in the sweltering sun, without being brooded. The marvel was that they were not cooked solid. It is not improbable that many of them were.

Confidently expecting to find diminutive mammals looting the nests, we continued our explorations far into the desert. To our surprise we saw not so much as a prehistoric mouse. Evidently this rookery was too far from water for any mammal to venture into it. Whatever a reptile may do in the way of supplying itself with sufficient water by the chemistry of its body, nearly all mammals require at least an occasional drink. The selection of this waterless sink as a breeding ground seemed to show that the great predatory reptiles were wiser than we had imagined.

The eggs varied greatly in size. Some nests contained twenty or more no larger than hens' eggs, while others exhibited a solitary, sausage-like monstrosity the size of a watermelon. We would have given a

good deal to rip open one of those evil melons to see what was inside. But of course we could not, and the analyser then (as now) could show us nothing of the interior of an opaque object.

It was on one of those bloated eggs that we saw our first insect, and we instantly restored our initial estimate of the reptiles' intelligence. After all they were brainless beyond redemption. The merest rudiment of a maternal instinct would have forced the negligent mother to keep pests away from her half-born young by sitting on the egg. But she was probably a hundred miles away, gorging herself.

If some divine messenger could have made her understand that she had laid an egg, which at this moment was in urgent need of her protection, she would have called him a liar, for the laying of the egg meant as little to her as the shedding of a dried scale. To say that she had forgotten the egg the moment it was laid would be undeserved slander. She was unaware of ever having done anything to perpetuate her kind. Any mammal invading the rookery would be promptly chased, not as a potential killer of the unborn, but as an annoying pest that should furnish food but that always eluded tooth and talon.

The industrious insect fascinated us, as we had never seen one exactly like it, even in the museum fossils. It was a cross between a tropical cockroach and a hornet. The hinder part and the wings were the hornet's. Instead of the familiar black and yellow livery, this prehistoric specimen patterned itself in scarlet and bright green. In size it was about as big as a man's thumb. When we first saw her—she soon proved her sex—she was busily traversing the huge egg in a systematic search for the softest spot in the rubbery skin. Having found what she wanted, she drilled a neat puncture and deposited her eggs. Her young, at least, would not die of starvation in infancy.

Proceeding further into the scorching wilderness, we soon discovered that the place was infested. Everywhere the scarlet and green livery flickered over the simmering rocks as the busy insects sought their own breeding grounds. Presently we noticed two other species of the winged workers, one a dull blue all over, the other a muddy brown. Neither of these much exceeded a common wasp in bulk. They too were busy with the reptile eggs. But they never poached on one another's preserves. Each selected its own type of egg, and neither ever interfered with the largest—which were already efficiently attended to by the scarlet and green depositors of eggs. In all we distinguished five distinct species. All were specialists of the narrowest type. It was an easy deduction that exactly five kinds of reptiles patronized the rookery.

At Bronson's request I censor the account of what we saw happening to the eggs when nature had taken her usual prolific course. It was devastatingly effective. If any unborn reptile escaped that massacre, it was merely because his careless mother had unwittingly gorged in such a manner as to endow her egg with an extra tough hide, to her own discomfort and her offspring's preservation.

Wishing to find where the absent parents were hiding themselves, we turned back and made our way toward a distant range of low, barren, gray hills. As on previous similar attempts we overestimated our ability to beat the image. The perspective seemed to move with us, and the barren hills drew no nearer. In the clear air of the desert what looked like five miles might easily be fifty. To add to

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our confusion, intensely real mirages began to shimmer the sands between us and the hills like vast sheets of rippling water. We were as hopelessly lost as if we had strayed into the middle of the Sahara desert.

Our first warning of approaching danger was the passing of a swift shadow. A few yards to our left a patch of deep purple skimmed over the dazzling sands and vanished. Looking up involuntarily we saw the leader of a vast squadron sailing due south with the speed of a racing plane. Far to the north a flapping, tumultuous multitude swept into view, straining to overtake the leader. Within ten seconds they were directly overhead.

For all of five minutes the routed rabble flapped its precipitate course over our heads, their long necks out-stretched and their batlike membranes fanning the air in strong, steady strokes. We of course heard nothing. But we almost did. The long heads, with jaws like an alligator's, opened and shut—the whole head seemed to gape, not merely the mouth—rhythmically, keeping time to the flapping of the membranes. Every fifth flap the head opened and, no doubt, emitted a screech.

PRESENTLY the weaklings of the flock began to lag. The sudden and prolonged flight was too much for their untried membranes. First one teetered crazily as its exhausted forelimbs refused to function further, recovered its balance for a few yards, glided a hundred feet farther, and collapsed. As its body shot into the sand others began to hesitate, until the sky rained crumpled reptiles while the main flock flapped on its course as straight as an arrow. They knew where they were going, or anyhow their leader did.

We were about to examine one of the fallen weaklings, when the light began to fail. The glance we got was sufficient. This young one must have had a wing spread of five or six feet. Its grinning skull was as long as that of a horse, and its straight, narrow jaws were crammed with reptilian teeth. This monstrosity of a head graced a swan-like neck. The creature was part bat, part bird, but still mostly reptile, in spite of the bristly feathers on its scaly legs.

"Look behind!" Langtry shouted. "That's what chased them."

As if a gigantic broom were making a clean sweep of the desert sands clear down to bedrock, a tempest of yellow sand billowed skyward from horizon to horizon. The sun was already blood red, although the whirling sandstorm was still a good thirty miles distant.

Peering at the volleying sand clouds racing toward us, we made out what appeared to be a crawling black band at the base of the oncoming storm. It was as if invisible hands were rolling up a black carpet before the fury of the wind. At first we thought this crawling band was a freakish shadow cast by the sand clouds. But its far slower advance proved that it was no shadow. In half a minute the sandstorm overtook the band, obliterating it. Before we realized that the storm was upon us the last of the sunlight flickered out in broad flashes of dull yellow and we found ourselves in total darkness.

For what seemed like days we endured the scouring tempest. The very absence of all sound but made the storm less supportable. Flickering sheets of dull gray lived for a second or two in the enveloping black, and by the transient flashes we saw stones and tattered branches of trees streak by like bullets. Presently larger objects began to roll by with the speed of cannon balls. Soon the air was thick with them, trundling and crashing into one another as the violence of the wind hurled them before it like tufts of thistledown.

In one of the more continuous gray flashes we saw what these black things were. The bodies of countless thousands of gigantic reptiles were being swept from the desert floor like so much refuse. And for good measure the bodies of innumerable diminutive mammals were swept along like rubbish with the carcasses of their enemies. The grim reaper of our human mythology had degenerated to a mere crossing sweeper or scavenger. The path of the mammals crossed that of the desert reptiles. Let them both be swept out of the way.

When the wind died and the sand settled no sign of life broke the desolation. An occasional slight swelling of the desert sands might mark the tomb of some buried reptile, but so thorough had been the sweeping that neither head nor limb stuck up to mark the creature's last bed. The eggs, of course, were smothered under yards of sand. Less than an hour of nature's major violence had done more for the desert reptiles than a thousand years of internecine war and prolific pests could ever have accomplished. Once more the illusive mirages shimmered on the crystal air as if there never had been reptiles or storms to trouble the desert solitudes.

Several things had impressed themselves on our eyes during the storm. We remembered the tattered branches that had flashed by, and the black carpet of fleeing monsters. They probably were expelled from their feeding grounds by the wind and had instinctively tried to outrace it to their true home, the more familiar desert. With reasonable patience we might hope now to locate the green paradise on our records and follow there the happier domestic life of the giant reptiles—happier, that is, for at least some of them. For there is no escape from the fundamental law of natural economics that all living land animals ultimately draw their sustenance from the land, and that those who do not live directly off the crops which the land provides live on the farmer. We were now anxious to visit the industrious farmer and see how he passed his time. Surely there must be tranquillity somewhere in all this troubled world.

Another thought occurred to Bronson. Putting several things together, he predicted that should we be lucky enough to light upon the paradise we were seeking we should find another of nature's forces heavily engaged. As a young man Bronson had travelled extensively in Africa, and he recalled one very dramatic instance of nature's inexhaustible fertility in devising new checks and balances. To anticipate slightly, I may say that Bronson's guess was verified in every detail. For the moment we decided to continue the explorations which the sandstorm had interrupted.

GIVING up the attempt to reach the distant hills unaided, we signalled to the engineers to "forward" the image thirty miles. I have not mentioned, I think, that one member of our party now always trundled a small wireless set by which we could communicate with the rotunda when a particular scene proved baffling. Instantly the image flickered and shifted. The location again was not right. We were about to signal for another thirty miles forward, when nature obliged us by shifting the action directly under our feet, and we learned what the low hills concealed without further exploration.

"Look over there," Bronson exclaimed, indicating a wonderful mirage about five miles away on our left. "That's the best yet. It beats the one I saw in the Sudan, and that was the realest thing I ever saw—only it wasn't real. Even the Arab guides said it would have fooled them too if they

As the black mass beneath him heaved, Belshazzar leaped for his very life.

hadn't known there was nothing but sand for a hundred miles in all directions. This is better. No," he added critically after a long look, "I'll have to give it second best after all. The African one had twice the brilliance of this."

We who had not seen mirages in Africa thought this one quite fair. For long we stood watching the curiously real sheets of water gradually advancing, shining like polished silver as they came. Sand dunes were slowly surrounded and quickly dissolved. The more distant expanses reflected the blue of the sky like mirrors, and even the paler violet around the horizon was reproduced with startling fidelity to nature.

"You are quite sure the African mirage beat this one?" Sellar asked.

"Oh, undoubtedly," Bronson asserted confidently. "This one hasn't half the brilliance of the other."

"Then it must have been pretty good," Sellar remarked dryly. "In fact better than the real thing."

"What do you mean?" Bronson demanded, ruffling.

"Why, don't you see what that is? Look at the gap in the hills back there. You can see it crumble and widen as you watch. There's a real river behind those hills, and it has broken through. That's real, wet water you're looking at. We had better signal for a change of base if we want to see anything. The flood will be over our heads inside of ten minutes."

Sellar was right. The millions of tons of sand dumped into the invisible river by the recent storm had either dammed it at a bend or raised the level of its bed at some weak spot of the hills, and it was now gouging out a new channel in the desert floor. Knowing now that it was no mirage, we easily interpreted the puzzling image. As the advancing water fingered its swift way over the parched sands, steam and clouds of dust rose before it, drifted back over the already deep water, and settled quickly. The new river came on like a gigantic plow, turning aside the smoking sands and furrowing deep its untried channel.

The sands at our feet crawled toward the water and crumbled. Signalling for an advance both in space and time, we leapt forward with the image to the point where the torrent had traversed the entire desert. A blue wall of dense vegetation blocked the advance of the river. As if feeling out the weakest spot of the barrier, the tumbling brown torrent took a long swerve to the right, straightened out, and shot directly at the lowest spot in the blue barrier. On a ten mile front the wall collapsed as the water struck it, and straight through the jungle a clean swath was cut, opening up the desert to whatever hostile forces the barrier of vegetation had blocked.

"Now," said Bronson, "if that had happened anywhere near the Congo basin, I could have told you what to expect."

It happened anyway.

ACTING on a strong hint from Bronson, we decided that it would be more profitable to follow the course of the new river before exploring the forests. That irresistible volume of water, broader than the Mississippi, had at last found the channel it had been seeking for ages. Instead of meandering thousands of miles along the desert's edge to a salty ocean, it now rushed down the shortest course to an inland sea. But it did not reach its grave without obstruction.

To see how inevitable was the conflict in the forest which came as a slow climax to the sandstorm, we retraced the history of the river many times. The final struggle began the moment the river burst its old banks. The end did not come for many centuries. Only one scene each, from the beginning, the middle and the end of the record need be described.

Our first ascent took us swiftly through the steaming forest, as the projectors canted forward, without anywhere halting. The river was still swift and deadly, although its waters slipped along as clear as glass. As the trees thinned out and full sunlight again broke through and dissipated the steam of rotting vegetation, we advanced with the flood into a low, broad valley carpeted with rich, tall grass. By properly resetting the projectors, the engineers at last timed our entry into this "the middle valley", with the first arrival of the river as it rushed from the forest.

The floor of the valley in our vicinity was almost level. Consequently the flood gushed out over it without dredging a definite channel at first. Still advancing with the flood, we followed it for nine days and nights. The days were a confusion of blurred images as stampeded herds fled to higher ground before the sudden assault of the on-rushing water. At the greatly accelerated rate of projection we failed to make out what these reptiles were, beyond two striking differences which distinguished them from those we had already seen.

These monsters lurched over the ground on all four feet, and many of them were grotesquely armored and extravagantly horned. An occasional bewildered giant, stumbling along upright on its hind legs, towered above the first herds we saw, but from its blundering actions the creature was clearly an interloper. As we left the forest farther and farther behind us, only the fleeing quadrupeds flashed by. Whatever these armored monstrosities might be in times of peace, they showed themselves capable of swift flight before an enemy. That not all had endurance enough to reach the higher ground, probably twenty miles or more from the spreading water, was proved by the floating bodies of those who had lost their race. But, judged by the teeming thousands in the maddened herds, the casualties were negligible.

For nine days and nights the flood traversed the great valley, seeking an outlet to the unknown sea. On the morning of the tenth day we saw the first serious obstacle to further progress directly athwart the course of the river. A long range of black hills about a thousand feet high in the mass blocked the horizon against the rising sun.

What rocks composed those hills? If basalt without a pass through, the valley behind us, and every creature in it, was doomed. Advancing the projectors, the engineers enabled us to predict the sequel. The hills were dense volcanic ash. At their highest and narrowest point they formed a barrier less than eleven hundred feet high and thirty miles broad. The herds behind us were safe.

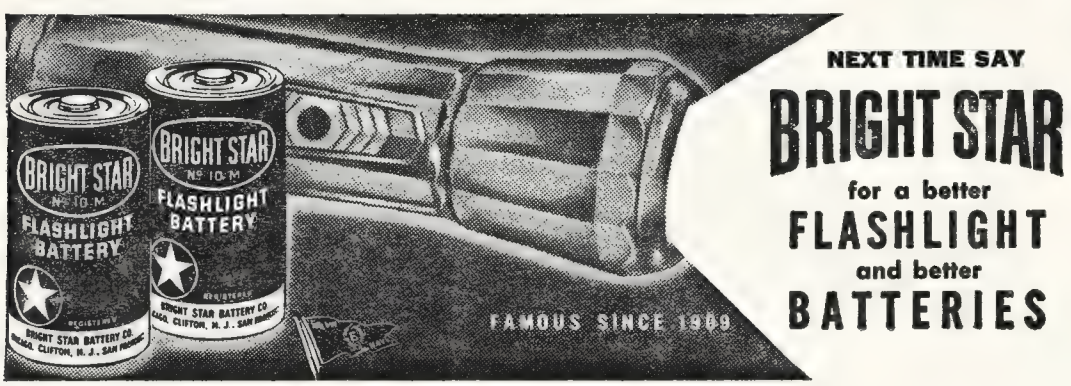
To follow the filling up of that enormous natural reservoir in detail was out of the question. It filled so slowly that every living creature spared by the flood had ample time to browse its way to higher ground. At intervals of ten years we sampled the accelerated records to gauge the rising of the water. Between consecutive readings we barely detected the slow creeping of the water line up the barren hills. Evaporation all but balanced the inflow, and over two hundred readings—two thousand years or more—elapsed before the first, thin rivulet, crumbling the weakest part of the wall, burst through and began to trickle determinedly down its own pass.

We slowed the projectors to the natural speed and followed the trickle. Three days sufficed to drain the stored up floods of twenty centuries. The whole range of hills crumbled and dissolved into the ever widening chasm, and the pent-up mass of water gushed over the sloping plain beyond like the race from a spillway.

This time the water did not hesitate. It's channel had been dredged for it ages before. The valley was a long, gently sloping trough between precipitous cliffs of basalt. Brimming this natural sluiceway to the banks, the flood surged down it in one leap, all of a day's journey, to a boundless inland sea.

Again forwarding the projectors, we passed to the inland sea and waited the coming of the flood. Unlike the lake of the lotus eater, this fresh water sea was walled by precipices of black volcanic rock, and there was no beach. Far in the violet distance we made out massive promontories jutting far into the water. More than one of these still smoked ominously. The same furnaces which had voided their slag to build the cliffs were still actively pouring molten rock into the sea.

The flood surged home, spreading so swiftly over the black water that the surface of the lake threw back the reflection of the foaming front without a ripple.



THE next record, twenty-five years farther on, showed a strong, deep river flowing swiftly and evenly into the sea. So far as we could judge, the level of the water had not risen perceptibly.

It was now time, according to Bronson's theory, to explore the surrounding territory. As the reptiles in this valley of the inland sea, as we called it, were quite similar to those of the middle valley, I shall not go into detail regarding them, but defer particulars till I report on the forest bounding the other valley. It is sufficient for the moment to state that the bulk of the population were fourfooted browsers, heavily armored. They were an essentially unclean race. Their pastures glittered with iridescent flies of all the brassier hues twinkling over the abundant offal. The great plated beasts paid not the least attention to the swarming pests searching out the crevices of their armor, or circling the horny rims of their eyes.

Bronson was somewhat crestfallen at the outcome of our brief exploration, until Langtry suggested a possible way of saving his chief's theory. The armored monsters were so healthy in spite of the busy biters, stingers and suckers, merely because all those who were not immune had perished ages ago and had left no delicate offspring. Bronson had confidently expected to find at least one weakling dying of some quick plague. Walled in as they had been before the river opened a wide door into their green paradise, the browsing reptiles had bred a sturdy, resistant race by the simple process of letting the insects eliminate the unresistant.

If indeed any of these gaudy insects were potential murderers, they caused the armored herds no more inconvenience than a passing fever—like human measles. What the stingers might do in a virgin field remained to be seen—as we have seen in our time what measles can do to Esquimaux.

Between the valley of the inland sea and the middle valley we noted one significant difference. The middle valley was free of any considerable expanse of dead water; the other was pockmarked with foul pools standing black and evil in every depression of the volcanic rocks. The freedom of the middle valley from annoying pests was due most probably to the absence of standing water in which the insects might develop from larvae to winged stingers.

The barren hills between the valleys having been washed out by the flood, it could only be a matter of a century or two until the populations should begin to mix. But long before they did, the winds passed back and forth through the gap, commercing in evil. Sampling the record fifty years after the river first burst through, we found the channel between the valleys infested with glittering, wind-borne hordes.

The valley which the river had taken nine days to conquer held up the advancing insects for less than a month. This was their paradise—till they perished for lack of still water in which to breed. But before they lived out their brief season they had subdued the valley.

Passing over that merciless conquest, I shall briefly report on its recoil upon the desert folk—the rapacious bipedal lizards who stalked through the green silences of the forest in quest of worthy enemies and well earned feasts. These were a different tribe from the cowardly reptiles of the marshes by the flats who attacked only the defenceless. These were kings and conquerors, and they walked like kings. The deserts were their domain; the steaming forests and the plains beyond, their well stocked farms.

Their queens laid their eggs in the sands, and promptly forgot them, to follow their mates into battle. The puniest of those giants had the courage of a mad rhinoceros and the direct abandon of an enraged rattlesnake. In point of endurance alone this great race represents one of nature's major efforts. She gave them a long trial—so long indeed that her latest experiment with our own race is as less than a day in the centuries of their existence.

No one who has seen them in action in the records can patronize these kingly reptiles or speak of them with contempt. They lacked what we call reason, perhaps, but their riches in other respects make us beggars in comparison. Being devoid of the higher faculties which we boast of, rationalization was impossible to them. They acted, and took the consequences of their actions without squealing for quarter, no matter who or what opposed them, and they died as they had lived, without fear. To have seen them is to respect them.

The glittering insects had made a clean sweep of the middle valley. Seen from a distance the lush meadows resembled melon fields after a severe frost has passed. Under the blistering sun the bloated bodies swelled and all but burst the armor plate. These impregnable fortresses, huger and stronger than rhinoceroses, had fallen

before the assault of an insignificant fly. No gas attack against helpless civilians was ever more devastating. Not one reptile of all the herds on the meadows survived.

Those which had taken refuge in the shadows of the forest fared better. Sunlight seemed to be necessary for the health and well-being of the flies. Nevertheless they pursued the refugees into the forest, slowly feeling their way from one sunny glade to the next. Until at last the work of destruction was done, and the last few tremendous reptiles remaining tore each other to pieces for food.

CHAPTER III

THE BRIDGE

ALL the ingenious or terrible variation of the reptilian pattern were worked out at one time or another on that lost continent of the north. As the record swept forward in time, a hundred thousand or half a million years at a stride, we paused now and then for an occasional glimpse at the dying age. What was a vast inland sea teeming with life in an early record became a sandfilled sink in the later histories, too far from greenery to support even the hardiest of the heat-loving reptiles. A still later record showed the same sink again inhabited to saturation with a ravenous population, as torrential rivers from younger mountains again filled the basin and made life possible.

Still later the resurrected sea dried once more as the aged mountains were levelled and the rivers ceased to flow. What had been a lush paradise in the golden age slowly withered as the lake shrank to streaks of alkali marsh. Those whose natural habitat was the water struggled to adapt themselves to the land, while those that had developed beyond all reason on the land, made a feeble attempt to lead a half watery existence as their food supplies dimished and finally disappeared beneath the advancing sands.

In the last slow struggle opposing instincts met and locked in a ruthless conflict which rapidly eliminated all but the fiercest and wariest, until in the end those who would overtake the retreating water were annihilated by those who sought a foothold on the starving land. Migrations in search of fresher seas ended in disaster in the deserts after centuries of futile struggle and ever sharper war of like upon like, and only the birds made the journey.

Everywhere the record was the same. At first the strong, vigorous races responded magnificently to their changing environments, and rapidly reached the peak of their superb efficiency. Then nature forgot them.

The horny armor that had made one giant invincible against the attacks of its most powerful enemy continued to develop like a horrible disease. Utterly useless excrescences of bone or horn impeded every movement in the jungles and forests, and drove the clumsy creatures into the open, to be slaughtered by enemies that loved the sunlight. Overdeveloped claws forced those who had leapt lightly as birds upon their prey to hobble lamely after the punier offspring of degenerating herds, and what had been joyous battle in a more vigorous age became a disgusting exhibition of starving senility pursuing spiritless cowardice. Often the shambling tracker was sheerly incapable of killing his quarry. In the end the pursuers became scavengers of carrion.

But all these consequences of nature's forgetfulness were of minor importance. These tragedies of indifference counted as nothing beside those of the major offensives of the revolution.

To render the creeping advance of the ocean over the land visible, it was necessary to compress a million year analysis into an hour's projection. The engineers hurried the televisor through the next half million years.

At first we failed to appreciate what we saw under the greatly accelerated rate of projection. The scene might have been that of the vast fertile central plains of North America. A stopdown gave us a glimpse of teeming reptilian life at the very peak of its glory. The boundless prairies, paradises of luxuriantly tall grasses, rich shrubs and edible trees, were populated to the limit of their capacity to support life. Speeding the projection again we let the image flash out in smooth green, in which no detail of life registered.

For long the green expanse remained precisely as we had first projected it. Then, like ice beginning to split on a frozen river in the spring thaw, a jagged fissure severed the plain in two. In a second the fissure brightened and lived like a streak of fire. Another second and the crimson was blotted out in rapidly spreading black. Other fissures opened from the first, these in turn branched and glowed, until finally the whole plain cracked in a million places and seemed to crawl.

We stopped down and followed the beginning of the record at its natural rate. Red hot lava was oozing from every crack and creeping over the plain. As it crept it blackened and dense, dun smoke rolled lazily up, blotting out the last stampedes of the few that had not been suffocated by the first outgush of deadly gases.

The interpretation of the other yellow flash which was analyzed in detail was quite similar. It chanced to be near the ocean.

The water heaved convulsively and sent wave after wave toppling over the headlands far back onto the plain. The terrified monsters were swept by swarms into the sea. Those farther back on the plain, beyond reach of the tidal waves, collapsed where they stood. No living thing could stand on the pitching ground that rolled and tossed like a stormy sea. As the fissures burst open and the lava gushed out, the violence of the earthquakes abated, and the stunned reptiles got to their feet.

Where to flee? Some ventured onto the blackening crust and plunged steaming into solid fire. Others stampeded toward the sea, blind with terror, the pursuing lava rolling after them. At the edge of the cliffs they milled back and forth, seeking a way down to the water. Again the floor of the sea heaved, and a wall of black water hurled the refugees back on the lava. Clouds of steam overwhelmed the day in impenetrable darkness for a moment. Then the marriage of fire and water was consummated in a cataclysm that split the sky.

The last we saw on that record was a rolling mountain of yellowish smoke trampling over the sea, and we imagined that it hid the last flight of the birds, still cleaving the air on steady wings.

To get an intelligible record we went on slowly, at ten thousand year steps.

The fate of those who perished in the volcanic outbursts was happier than that of those who survived. As I have tried to indicate, there was never, at any stage of the revolution, any such disaster as universal and continuous volcanic activity. Even at the peak of violence at least one vast plain escaped lava. It was a period of furious earthquakes and devastating invasions of the land by the oceans, but even these appalling violences lost their full terror when eased over the course of a hundred thousand years. The constantly terrified herds gradually adapted themselves to accept violence as the immemorial order of nature, and a more alert race, swifter of foot and keener of muscular sense, survived from the merciless dicipline. They grew immune to the terrors which had paralyzed their untried ancestors. But for all their courage they dared not oppose the invincible enemy which nature brought up as her last reserve for their annihilation.

All the spectacular fury of earthquakes and volcanic fires was but the nerve-racking barrage before the charge. It did comparatively little damage—except to the land. Here the time scale played its fatal part. If the pulverized ash of the eruptions had been released a thousand times more slowly into the air, the cold-blooded reptiles might have won. But in what amounted to no more than a few days in the life history of their tribes, their heat supply was cut down a full two thirds. A dense blanket of fine pumice blocked the sun's radiation in the upper lanes of the atmosphere circling the pole. The reptiles had no time to adapt their shivering bodies to the cold, or to evolve a resistant race.

The great migration toward the south began. But retreat had been cut off. Only a long, narrow bridge of barren basalts united the dying continent and the sunny southern land, with its boundless green plains and open inland seas, which was the emigrant's promised paradise. On that bridge only stunted shrubs and wind blown low grasses grew. The seeds might suffice for ratlike mammals on the trek, but not for the lumbering reptiles. These required bales of fodder at a meal, and their horny mouths were not adapted for cropping.

A thousand years before the hardiest explorers of the kingly reptiles accidentally blundered onto the narrow bridge, the first snow had fallen far behind them, and the thin ice had floated on the surface of the northernmost inland sea. Had more than that thread of barren rock united the continents, whole nations would have escaped. But long before the first reptile dared put out on the long, hungry journey across the bridge, millions had perished on the bleak cliffs.

Few ever discovered the bridge. The majority endured centuries of slow starvation as season after season of sleety cold stunted the grass and killed the shrubs. As the winters lengthened and the chilly summers grew steadily colder, the vitality of the struggling survivors ebbed and they became incapable of sustained journeys.

Starving and listless they crawled like dying flies over the ravaged plains in search of a tuft of living reeds. The flesh eaters dogged the emaciated browsers, waiting for one to collapse of exhaustion. They had grown incapable of killing all but the youngest, and few young now survived more than a day after emerging from the egg.

If only the listless hosts had discovered the bridge they need not have perished. Heat and food in plenty lay less than a year's journey to the south. Yet almost in sight of the promised land they perished of cold and hunger, dying miserably. But one remnant did escape. These were the geniuses of their tribes.

The continent shivered in one final, feeble outburst of volcanic activity. It was nature's last gift to those of the reptiles who had not discovered the bridge and her welcoming threat to the newer race which had already passed over. As the slow lava oozed down to the ocean the emaciated reptiles swarmed around it in a last effort to restore their ebbing vitality. For half a generation the dying remnant marooned on a dead continent recovered a tithe of their ancient vigor in the grateful heat. The herb eaters scoured the quaking plain in search of food, and the flesh eaters followed and attacked. Presently the powdered ash sifting down day and night, month after month and year after year, smothered the last of the herbage, and the final starvation began. The flesh eaters outlived their cousins less than a month.

That final gift of heat for a brief season was the marooned reptiles' undoing. Within half a year's journey of the bridge the last survivior on the continent perished. A sterner climate would have urged them ever southward to warmth and safety.

We reset the analyzer and followed the bolder remnant which, half a generation before, had ventured—probably without intention—onto the bridge.

BUT for a succession of unusually open winters and warm springs about fifty years before the last outburst of lava, it is doubtful whether any of the great reptiles would ever have ventured onto the bridge. There was but little on the forbidding basalt to tempt a browser so long as a single shrub or tuft of grass remained uneaten on the mainland.

It was a strange assortment of reptiles that finally fought its way to the southern shore of the dying continent within reach of the bridge. Monsters that should have been extinct a thousand years before had somehow contrived to send their representatives down the centuries to uphold their honor in the last struggle.

Among those who reached the southernmost shore of the continent half a century before the last eruptions were three gigantic ambassadors from the race of the strong runners with the stiletto thumbs. They should have been dead thousands of years before we saw them. But natural selection had spared their rapacious ancestors, and here they were, lean and full of murder. The running pair we had seen in the dry river bed of an earlier record were weaklings compared to these.

When we first saw them they were squatting together in the middle of a beautiful little spring meadow. The mild winters had encouraged the shrubs, the shrubs had fattened the vegetarians, and the turtle-beaked racers had fared well. At this moment they seemed to be holding a council of war. We thought they were sticking together for mutual protection. Our experiences with reptiles should have taught us caution in theorizing. To our surprise what looked like a gentle conspiracy in the hatching suddenly developed into a violent courtship.

THERE were two males and one female, probably a more provocative triangle than the other way about—at least in this instance. If indeed the continuance of the race had been entrusted to this trio, one of the males was superfluous. Two females and one male would have been a less highly explosive mixture and a safer one for the endurance of the race.

The female seemed to show no particular preference for either of the males over the other. She accepted the nearer. A ludicrous touch—purely accidental we mistakenly imagined at first—was added by the rejected suitor. For fully half a minute he balanced on one leg, his stubby tail stiff in the air behind him, pensively scratching one enormous foot with the longest talon of the other. He looked exactly like a meditating devil in a sacred painting of the thirteenth century—except that his flat head lacked horns.

Presently he slowly raised his right hand till the three-foot stiletto grazed his beak. Then, for a minute or so, he stood thoughtfully chewing that bizarre thumbnail. What we mistook for an absent minded exhibition of jealous chagrin turned out to be a foresighted act of prep-

aration. He was sharpening his longest dagger. The other was beyond repair, having been broken off about a foot below the tip. The dark red tongue protruded for an instant as the vicious beak half opened. It just grazed the sharpened point. The tongue vanished and the beak snapped shut. The stiletto was just right; another nibble and the tip would have been too fragile.

These enormous brutes did not leap into battle when they fought; they charged. Having sharpened his stiletto, the rejected suitor backed twenty paces on springy legs, and gave a little hop like a boxer about to leap in and land a knockout. Then the whole thirty tons of him charged. The lovers parted before he arrived.

Evidently such brawls between her mates were an old story to the female. She turned her back and marched calmly off to view the duel from a safe distance. Just as the males engaged she wheeled about and squatted comfortably on her haunches, her stubby hands clasped contentedly over her capacious stomach. She also had indulged in some rare rows in her time, for both of her daggers were broken off short. A spectator's or referee's part was the only safe one for her.

The defender had the best of it—at first. Both of his stilettos were intact. Like a boxer guarding his chin, the wary reptile shot both hands up to the level of his throat. His next action, if not the result of intelligence, was so much like it that we gave him full credit for his ingenuity. He turned both daggers quickly inward, till they formed a protective bar just below his vulnerable throat. All this was done instantly, instinctively. When the enraged attacker lunged up at the other's throat with a terrific jab of his sharpened stiletto, the crossed daggers of the defender shot down and deflected the stab. As the charging attacker, thrown off his balance, lunged past, the defender wheeled in a flash and his daggers came into instant play. First the right, then the left was plunged to the hilt into the attacker's back, about six inches below the massive shoulder blades. It was like a matador pricking a bull.

Unfortunately for our ingenious matador, he could not relinquish his long daggers after he had so successfully planted them. Neither had passed anywhere near the heart or the lungs. The net result of that brainy strategy was a quite irresistible fury on the part of the enraged reptile with the crimsoned shoulders. His strength doubled. Hunching his muscular back, he shot the other clean over his head; the daggers were wrenched out, and the brave defender landed squarely on his head thirty feet away.

In a flash the other was upon him, trampling like a maddened horse killing a rattlesnake. For the moment he was too furious with pain to remember what his talons were for. That momentary forgetfulness saved the other's valiant life and, more important, to it was due the discovery of the bridge.

Belshazzar had been taking a much needed nap, when the courtship began, in a gravelly watercourse skirting the meadow. Sounds which we could not hear had broken his dreams, and the clash of dagger on dagger had roused him fully. That peculiar sound evidently had a significance as stimulating for him as the clang of a dinner gong. He was over the top instantly. When his gigantic bulk first loomed over the meadow we thought the image must be distorted. He towered over the combatants as a full grown man overtops a couple of brawling schoolboys. The squatting female's flat head barely reached the middle of the marching giant's stomach.

Belshazzar marched, without haste, but at a swift, even speed which covered the ground like the shadow of a tall man running from the setting sun. His demeanor was one of ruthless capable determination. Whatever he might undertake he would carry through, though it might cost him a leg. But it was unlikely that any enterprise undertaken by Belshazzar would cost him so much as a horny grin of his reptilian lips. No living creature could successfully oppose this colossus, this masterpiece and invincible tyrant of a race of tyrants.

BELSHAZZAR belonged to the same tribe as the great reptiles we had seen in an earlier record of blindness and starvation. But no disease had ever thriven in this superb body, and no enemy had ever so much as scratched a single plate of the protective armor down the back. The muscular tail was long and fully developed. Even the exposed chest was amply protected by short but powerful forelimbs armed with stout claws that could either grapple or rip. And nothing short of plates of bone or horn six inches thick could withstand the slash of the huge talons of the feet or the snap and crunch of the broad jaws.

The whole head was a perfectly balanced engine of aggressive destruction. At least five feet long and three broad where it joined the massive neck, its entire length was jammed full of teeth that could slash or tear as occasion demanded or rage inspired. Not one of those splendid teeth had been broken, although many a horny shield or thighbone far back on the plains bore deep grooves which fitted some of the teeth exactly. Some few of the larger bones that had been cracked for their marrow showed what Belshazzar could do when he was really hungry.

Nature never surpassed this magnificent reptile in any of her creations. If he lacked human intelligence he exhibited a substitute—fierce cunning and a consummate skill in forcing his inhospitable environment to yield him the necessities of life—which was singularly like the power of reason.

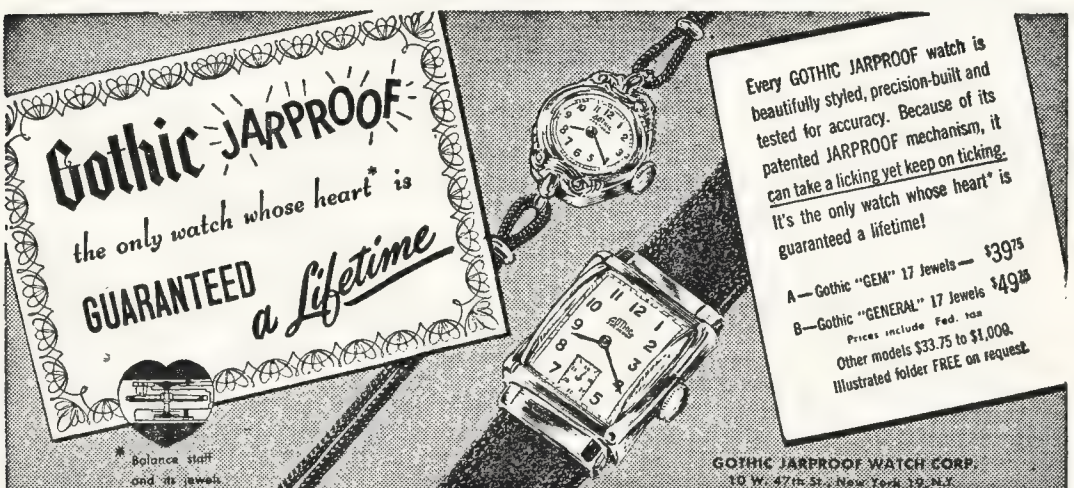
Possibly we who now saw him in action judged him too sympathetically. Had we looked at him critically according to our present ethical standards we should have condemned him as a brutal tyrant. But we could not. Belshazzar fought his battles himself. If any life was to be risked, and possibly sacrificed, it was his own which was placed in jeopardy.

Further, he fought the entire world, for the whole age was against him and his kind. That he had the instinctive, brute courage to face insuperable odds, even without knowledge of what was against him, instead of accepting the inevitable defeat before he was forced to, was not evidence of stupidity but of sportsmanship. He would see it through to the end, and be damned to it. No apology from any human being is in order. Having seen Belshazzar we respect him, the more perhaps because he was totally devoid of what we somewhat arrogantly called our higher faculties. He was a brute, some would say, but God had made him and he would walk the earth unashamed before his maker, as he had been made.

Belshazzar's advance must have been almost noiseless. Neither of the duelists was aware of his approach, and the female heard him coming only when it was too late. As her head shot 'round and she jumped erect, Belshazzar leapt thirty feet through the air like an agile bird. All the tremendous muscles of his legs were behind that leap.

Before the terrified female could turn her head again preparatory to flight, Belshazzar had unbuttoned her. One expert slash by the middle talon of his foot down her back, from the nape of the neck to the root of her stubby tail, exposed the backbone, and in another second she was stripped. He killed her on the spot, one fierce eye fixed on her fighting mates. They were next on his program. But they were two quick for him. As he sprang to the slaughter the enraged brute trampling the other leapt into midair, his sharpened dagger aimed for Belshazzar's throat. Belshazzar kicked the maddened reptile squarely in the chest, hurling him forty feet, to land flat on his bleeding back. The other, with the two sound daggers, was now on its feet, running like a bird. We never saw him again. Belshazzar strode toward the prostrate reptile he had kicked.

It heard him coming, but it was still too stunned to rise. Instinctively it thrust its strong hind legs straight out to meet the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expected leap. Its single sound dagger stuck straight up from the stubby hand clutched tightly over the middle of the belly. The stunned brute could not have devised a more effective defense in the full possession of all its senses.

Belshazzar's reptilian eye took in the possibilities. Changing his course, he circled so as to get at his prostrate enemy's head. One snap of his jaws could have crunched it to a pulp. The detour squandered many precious seconds. Before Belshazzar had completely worked out his plan of attack the wounded duelist was on its feet, running as it had never run in all its athletic life. It was not a cowardly retreat; only a fool stands up to the devil of his particular race.

For a moment Belshazzar seemed to hesitate. Prudence urged him to devour the kill he had already made, while sport impelled him to pursue. What followed looked like an act of self-sacrifice, but to interpret it as such is probably a libel. No reptile, so far as we observed, ever gave up anything it wanted for itself. The strange capacity for appreciating the feelings of others to the possible hurt of one's own seems to be peculiar to the birds and the mammals. So what Belshazzar now did need not be ascribed to anything but his preference for a good fight over a mediocre meal. After all, the flesh he had killed was too close to his own to be really tempting.

TWO battered reptiles of his own magnificent tribe now emerged somewhat diffidently from the shelter of the watercourse. Although both had evidently been splendid specimens of their race in their prime, neither approached Belshazzar in size. From their gait and the many scars on their sagging hides it was clear that both were much older than Belshazzar. From his tolerance of their rather timid intrusion we judged them to be old acquaintances, perhaps even close friends of his infancy. For even the most ferocious of tyrants must have protectors when he is too feeble to fight for himself.

But again it is dangerous to impute altruism where none exists. As a baby, Belshazzar no doubt had been lively enough to stick pretty close to the strongest of his tribe. Otherwise he would have been eliminated. As he grew up, habit and the lifelong association of seeing the old folks around would accustom him to tolerating their humble presence and letting them share the less lordly of his feasts. In time he might even imitate very closely the behaviour which in higher mammals is analyzed into filial affection or less pleasing complexes. Indeed, from the manner in which the middle aged couple clung to one another for better or for worse all through their troubled record, it is not impossible that they were lifelong mates. If such was the case, then Belshazzar might well have been their son, which would account for much. On the other hand, we found no evidence that any of the reptiles believed in monogamy, as some of the birds and a few of the mammals seem to, nor that any of them were capable of either constancy or affection.

However, speculation as to the precise degree of kinship—if any—between the members of that strange trio is not without interest, especially to those who have endeavored to analyze Belshazzar's behaviour in the light of modern theories. One thing is certain, whatever may have been the relationships of those three: Belshazzar's character cannot be explained in terms of any of the classical complexes which have received Greek names. If he had any sort of a complex or fixation, it was of a new kind, and it deserves a name of its own. He was a reptile, and he cannot be pigeonholed in any mammalian psychology.

For similar reasons the engineers refused to name Belshazzar's two middle-aged camp-followers after any of the Greek or Roman heroes and heroines. The lady they called Jezebel, simply because she looked like what they thought Jezebel should have looked like. The other looked as if his name was Bartholomew. These labels have the advantage of not suggesting any possibly non-existing kinship among the three.

It was the humble entrance of Jezebel and Bartholomew which decided Belshazzar in favor of pursuit. He abandoned his kill to them, and strode off after the fleeing refugee. Having seen Jezebel and Bartholomew well started on their dinner with a friendly little family row that did not amount to much, we decided to follow Belshazzar.

The fleeing duelist was still pelting over the plain at top speed as if the devil were after him—as indeed he was. Belshazzar did not run. With steady, untiring speed he marched like an Assyrian king after the mean slave who had irritated him, confident of his own superior wind. The runner could not maintain the killing pace

indefinitely. Presently he must slow down to recover his breath. While he dawdled, Belshazzar would continue to stride over the plain with relentless endurance. Then the runner would burst into a short spurt, and lose more wind. His next sprint would be shorter. And so it would go for a week if necessary.

As a matter of fact the chase lasted three day. With the first daylight we picked up Belshazzar, still striding evenly along. His enemy was nowhere visible, but his huge birdlike tracks, to say nothing of an occasional clot of blood, betrayed him to Belshazzar's all-seeing, reptilian eye.

Belshazzar seemed fresher than ever after his night's rest. About noon he spied the duelist, jogging along over a sandy waste, about three miles ahead. Probably the poor slave had passed a restless night with his aching, stinging wounds. Anyhow he was not covering much ground. Without apparent effort Belshazzar almost doubled his stride. In fifteen minutes his earth-shaking pursuit was heard by the refugee. A quick glance back confirmed his fears. He was off in a magnificent burst of speed which gained him a good five miles.

But his wind was not all that it had been. Pressing his stubby hands against his heaving stomach, he squatted to recover his breath. The hard-earned gain netted him nothing. The poor devil stood up and tried to run, but he could only walk. Still, by calling up his last reserves, he won the day. At nightfall he was still ahead.

Belshazzar must have got up before daybreak. When we picked him up again it was just a few minutes before sunrise. The resolute tyrant's undeviating tracks disappeared in the far distance; those of the refugee wove uncertainly hither and thither, crossing the straight line of unerring pursuit many times in a single mile. Belshazzar, we suspected, was using his sense of smell to supplement his hard, keen eyes.

The pursuer had now begun to show unmistakable signs of ravenous hunger. His abdomen had shrunk to a concave nothing, his horny lips snarled back from the murderous teeth, and his merciless eyes were staring and brilliant. What was a three foot dagger to the infuriated strength and cold science of this ravenous tyrant? We began to wish that nature would once in a while play with honest dice. The exhausted brute still running for its life would have no chance whatever against its pursuer. In its private battle it had put up a plucky, intelligent fight.

THE chances were evened late that afternoon. The stunted shrubs of the desert became less meagre, and a dark blue band of real vegetation stretched across the horizon. This was possibly the last oasis of true fertility in all the southern part of the dying continent, and the mild seasons had restored its luxuriance.

When the blue band came into view, Belshazzar was a scant half mile behind the exhausted dueler. The wretched devil was stumbling along with hanging head and blundering feet, spiritless and dejected. Even Belshazzar was beginning to show the strain, although his stride had not shortened. A puff of breeze caught the dust from a particularly bad stumble and blew it back toward the pursuer.

Instantly the exhausted duelist's head flashed up, alert. The wind bore a refreshing, familiar fragrance. The scent put new life into his reeling body, and in one splendid burst of speed he was off, full tilt, on this last great race. His arms suddenly tensed and became strong once more as he balanced to attain the maximum speed. The long stiletto rose and fell in a quick, energetic rhythm, keeping perfect time to the piston-like thrust and plunge of the muscular legs. He raced toward the greenery like a gigantic bird, sure of his ability to reach cover before the devil could catch him. By a good margin he beat Belshazzar to the forest and disappeared behind its green wall. That was the last we saw of him for years. Wishing him well, we concentrated our attention on the baffled Belshazzar.

The rage of a thwarted tiger would be mere kittenish play beside the frothing fury of the cheated reptile. He actually slavered with impotent rage as he almost broke into a run to overtake his vanished quarry. Twice he stopped for a few seconds, ramping like a maddened vulture, to sharpen his talons by ripping them through the gravel. To add to his chagrin, he had forgone the meal which prudence had advised him to devour before starting his chase, and he was now ravenously hungry. He could have devoured the runner, daggers and all, at one sitting. We would have given much to hear his yells as he scattered the gravel far and wide, but we had to be content with staring into his murderous mouth. Lashing himself like a demon with his magnificent tail he strode rapidly into the forest.

We had expected to find the greenery thickly populated, and we were not disappointed. Unfortunately for Belshazzar, the triumphant runner had already started the stampede. The heavily armored tribes of browsers had almost forgotten what one of his fleet-footed, stabbing kind looked like. The sudden apparition of the monster who had become almost a legend to their placid, all but invincible herds, sent them crashing through the forests as if the day of judgment were upon them. The first smashing rout startled those still browsing in the depths, and by the time Belshazzar arrived the whole population was well started on its exodus to the plains beyond.

Trees were splintered and trampled like dry shrubs before the blind stampede of maddened monsters—stupidly abandoning their safest refuge in a moment of terror. Once started, nothing could stop the panic. The slower moving tanks, armored out of all necessity or reason, lumbered in the wake of the shock troops who had battered down great avenues through the forest, although they had not the slightest grounds for alarm. As long as they lived they were impregnable; only when they became lifeless hulks would they offer a possible meal to the more ingenious of the scavengers. But the mob spirit swept them along with the rest, and they trundled stupidly forward like gigantic turtles in the direction of greatest disturbance.

Possibly they should not be censured for their stupidity. After all, it may have been intelligence in disguise. Nature had pursued their kind with disaster for as long as their instincts could recall, and only those who had fled had survived. That she tricked them now with a very realistic imitation of an earthquake and eruption was no fault of theirs.

Being unable to obtain sufficient light to follow the rout clear through the forest, we canted forward and awaited the emergence of the herds on the farther side. Fortunately the riot had started in the narrowest band, so we had not long to wait.

Now Belshazzar's efficient coöperation hastened the exodus. Without his help it is a question whether the herds ever would have emerged. He kept after them with splendid resolution, urged on to the limit of his efficiency by a constantly sharpening hunger. For these and other equally obvious reasons, we credit Belshazzar with the important discovery of the bridge.

WE stood on a sloping, barren strip of sandy waste between the forest and the ocean, waiting for the stampede to break through. About twenty miles behind us the continent tapered to a narrow tip which vanished in a thin line over the horizon. This was the bridge, sharply clear as a stretched string in the brilliant air, connecting the dying continent and the sunny land of promise far to the south. Even from our elevation of four or five hundred feet above sea level we could not see the distant shoreline of the southern continent; the stark blue of the salty channel humped slightly, hiding the shore behind the curvature of the earth.

Over that slight hump the basalt bridge also disappeared, and we could only guess that it actually joined the invisible continent. At its broadest the bridge was about five miles wide. From that it tapered to a scant quarter of a mile at the narrowest point, when it again rapidly broadened to about five miles.

Although we could not see the southern continent, we knew that it existed. Barely distinguishable against the violet haze of the farther sky, four snowy cones loomed up against the light, only just more substantial than the pale haze itself. By glancing away after a long look, and glancing back again, we made out one further significant detail. Above each of the cones was a faint, purpish cloud. The cones were still active. What appeared at this great distance as faint discolorations of the sky were no doubt dense, stationary clouds of black smoke.

We had been so interested in tracing the bridge over the horizon that we missed the actual emergence of the first monster. When we next turned our eyes to the forest we saw him already far out on the sandy waste, still humping along as fast as he could go. The engineers dubbed him Old Rumpy on the spot. He seemed to know where he was going, and he headed straight down the slope toward the bridge. Probably his momentum and his fright carried him far beyond his logical halting place. Anyway, he had the appearance of consciously heading for the bridge.

As Old Rumpy played an important part in the passage of the bridge, I shall describe him in some detail. He was like none of the great reptiles we had yet seen, although he might have passed for a distant cousin of the lotus eaters. He was much less bulky than they, being not over thirty feet from tip to tip, but like them he walked on all four feet.

Except for his rump, he was well proportioned. Neither the neck nor the tail was too long, and even the ridiculously small head with its insignificant mouth was in keeping with the rest. The head in fact was little more than a blunted extension of the neck—like a harmless snake's head—with a characterless slit of a mouth and two nondescript holes for indifferent grayish green eyes.

Unlike the lotus eaters, Old Rumpy was well protected. His hide looked as tough as an aged elephant's, and it was covered with huge, close-set hexagonal warts of what might have been thick horn. Each wart in itself was quite a masterpiece of defensive ingenuity, with its sharp spike sticking up in the centre, and its irregular sides grooved to interlock with those of the six adjacent warts. When Old Rumpy sat down, as he presently did, and tucked all four legs and his neck under him, the warts joined like a bristling mat with not a single crevice. In this defensive position he resembled a grotesque cross between a badly deformed turtle and a pineapple.

Two thirds of Old Rumpy's personality was concentrated in his hind end. The huge rump struck up like a hillock above the rest of him, as if he had been heavily sat upon and squashed flat except for that upstanding bulge. He was the most harmless looking creature imaginable. All his ingenuity had gone into making himself attack proof. To imagine this wild creature assaulting anything more savage than a cabbage was impossible.

It was not long before the mob crashed out of the forest and hurtled down the slope, to the open sand where they were accustomed to do their fighting.

Although we made no attempt to count the milling monsters there must have been several hundred of them, all giants of their respective kinds, and all armored to the limit of their carrying capacity. This hurtling rush however was but the first wave of the panic. It had been started by our friend with the dagger.

The second wave followed the first, blindly. During all this wild commotion Old Rumpy plugged steadily forward, doing his asthmatic best to keep up with the crowd. Before long he had the visible part of the slope to himself.

IF OUR friend with the dagger was responsible for the first wave, the second must be credited to Belshazzar. Leaving Old Rumpy to follow the rabble, we canted the projecter and watched the forest for the coming of the king. By great good luck we caught an unobstructed view of Belshazzar as he strode from the forest.

The long chase and the foodless pursuit through the forest had doubled his ferocity. Never have we seen a living creature, reptile or mammal, which conveyed such an unmistakable threat of cold, calculating courage and invincible fury—about the worst combination an enemy can have. Others may have equalled Belshazzar's murderous determination as he marched over the sand after the fleeing rabble, for

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millions had faced starvation all through the past age, as he was now facing it unless he could shortly make a successful kill. But none that we had ever seen had shown the intelligence to conserve and govern their passions for the inevitable conflict. Belshazzar had a devil of a temper, but he only let it run away with him when he needed all of his rage to win.

Wheezy Old Rumpy was soon overtaken. He heard Belshazzar coming. Instantly he tucked in his legs and his neck, and hugged the sand. His enormous rear end sticking up like a thorny pineapple presented a new problem to Belshazzar. A more precipitate hunter would have leapt on that upstanding hump to slash at it with his talons, and he would have earned only a pair of badly cut feet for his pains.

Belshazzar was not carried away by his raging hunger. We could almost feel him think as he twice circled the tempting lump. How could he get at the meat? Once he approached the highest point and leaned over toward it, his evil jaws agape to their widest. But he could not quite make the desired nip without cutting his lips to tatters on the protective spikes. Accordingly he did not attempt it.

What he next did certainly refutes those who deny intelligence to all of the great reptiles. He strode to the front end, where Old Rumpy was narrowest, and quickly squatted, just opposite the horny corner of the shoulder covering. With one powerful push he thrust his great head under the corner. All the muscles of his massive neck and thighs tensed. Then he put his back into it, and heaved. Old Rumpy was capsized on his side. But he still had sense enough not to elongate his neck to see what was happening.

Belshazzar wasted no strength in attempting to roll his victim over on its back. It would have been impossible with that exaggerated hind end. Nor did Belshazzar waste time by walking 'round to the vulnerable spot. Straightening up, he sprang over the body. The peak of the back was now horizontal, and could be reached without danger of cuts. Belshazzar squatted, thrust out his head, and in one quick nibble with the front part of his mouth executed his prey mercifully by destroying the most important part of its nervous system. The under, unprotected region of the dead reptile offered no resistance to the rest of the proceedings, which, at Bronson's request, I censor from the record.

Gorged long before the available food supply was exhausted, Belshazzar retired to a convenient outcrop of basalt and sat down in the hottest spot available. Resting his broad back against the scorching rocks he sat at ease like an alderman after a banquet. His gigantic legs relaxed, his huge paunch rose and fell gently in the cheering sunshine, his stout tail relaxed and flopped limply to the sand, and his heavy head lolled over his shoulder. We almost heard him snore, and regretted that we could not.

After viewing his exhibition of intelligence we were somewhat disappointed with his carelessness now. Sitting fast asleep there with his back against the rocks and his enormous, vulnerable stomach fully exposed, he offered an irresistible temptation to any passing reptile who might feel inclined to tickle him. One quick slash by even a mediocre talon would have undone him completely. But probably Belshazzar knew as well as any of us that he and the old folks were the only reptiles in the vicinity capable of such a mean, efficient trick. His dreams were untroubled; not once did he twitch nor shift his comfortable position.

While Belshazzar dreamed, a few stragglers from the fleeing herds, having recovered their senses, began to drift back toward the forest. By twos and threes, looking somewhat foolish, they lumbered over the waste toward the succulent greenery. They were never to reach it. A third wave of refugees, smaller than either of the others, crashed out of the forest and sent them spinning back the way they had come. We guessed the cause; the old folks were catching up with Belshazzar to see whether he had spared them any tidbits.

Bartholomew emerged a few paces before Jezebel. It was not long before he got the wind of Belshazzar's opulent success. His tail flashed up. Unlike Belshazzar, he permitted himself to run. The shambling scuffle of the exhausted reptile covered the ground less successfully than Belshazzar's long, even stride. When he arrived at the scene of Belshazzar's feast he was too winded to take immediate advantage of his opportunity.

Jezebel in the meantime had tottered out, too exhausted to run. But she reached the banquet in better condition than her mate to enjoy it, and at once dived in.

Bartholomew was infuriated that she should dare to eat before he was ready. His first act when he recovered his wind was to reprove her sharply by a quite vicious nip in the neck. Jezebel retaliated in kind

Belshazzar's last fight.

by leaping straight into the air and coming down like a vulture on her mate's tail with all six of her killing talons. With surprising agility for a reptile of her apparent age she hung on and, quickly arching her neck, closed her teeth on the fleshiest part.

The fight was on. Had not Belshazzar intervened that maddened pair of starving reptiles would have slashed one another to ribbons within easy reach of plenty for both. It was as brainless an exhibition of ferocity as any we had seen. This pair, literally, would rather fight than eat, even when both of them were on the point of starvation.

The combined racket of the stampede from the forest and the old folks' brawl fully roused Belshazzar. Stretching his stiff hind legs he gave three terrific thumps with his tail and got to his feet. One swift glance took in the stampeding herd. They could wait. Striding toward the disorderly couple, he smacked his back with his tail, as if limbering it up. It was in perfect working order. Before they were aware of his approach the old folks found themselves knocked silly by one tremendous swipe of the tyrant's tail. He sent them spinning as he passed, without turning his head.

HAVING guzzled to the popping point, Belshazzar was now ready for hard work. Old Rumpy had done his bit by making Belshazzar's epic march possible. A band of browsers trying to sneak back to the forest first caught the tyrant's attention. Opening his bloody jaws to their widest he turned his head toward them. They heard him even if we could not. The effect was instantaneous. They wheeled as one and dashed down the slope. Evidently Belshazzar was still shouting commands, for his mouth was still wide open, and the monsters doubled their speed. Not till the last of them had vanished in the whirling dust did he take up the pursuit. He now had them where he wanted them —coralled on a narrow strip of desert which one capable flesh eater could hold against an army of vegetarians. But Belshazzar did not know about the bridge. Otherwise he might have hastened.

Unfortunately the rolling dust hid him from the prying analyzer, and we were forced to cant forward and wait his arrival at the beginning of the bridge. The barren basalts would be practically dustless.

The first of the mob had reached the bridge by the time we arrived. Some few had already ventured a mile or two onto the bridge to crop the stunted shrubs. All that was needed now to start the long journey to the southern continent was an energetic kick from behind. Belshazzar administered it early the next morning, in fact almost an hour before the sun rose. He had rested comfortably in the warm sands and was now full of energy, meat and enthusiasm. There was a wild commotion in the outskirts of the sluggish herds, a sudden rising of dust, and before we realized what was happening, the last trek of the great reptiles had started. Already they were jostling one another in their mad haste to get as far away as possible from the king of killers.

We were unable to form any very exact estimate of how long that last migration took. Much of it was hidden in the heavy storms which rolled up from the ocean or gathered in the upper air as the cold breath of the dying continent mingled with the warm young life of the sunny land far to the south.

But the end was to be delayed for many years, as we reckon time by our modest human standards. To the harassed remnant which made the dangerous passage the respite was but one last agonized moment in the life of their great race.

Had nature been merciful she would have split the floor of the channel then and there, to hurl the refugees skyward in fire and sudden death. But evolution has nothing to do with mercy; it is concerned largely with the elimination of the unfit, and whether it takes one quick season or a hundred thousand years of lingering death to get rid of the outworn and ailing is of no importance in the grand process which unfolds in moments a million years long.

One detailed picture of the passage of the bridge will suffice to give some conception of the whole. This may be centered around Belshazzar, as we managed to follow him more closely than any of the others. He must have been one of the last to venture onto the bridge in the main exodus. Bartholomew and Jezebel of course followed closely, and played a worthy part in keeping the slowly starving mob moving forward when many would have rushed back to perish in the homeland.

At the narrowest part of the bridge, a jagged and absolutely barren ribbon of black basalt less than a quarter of a mile wide hung in midair far above the cold blue depths of the channel. For a reptile with the feet of an exaggerated bird the

going was difficult enough; for an armored tank it was practically impossible. More than one too heavily fortified monster was condemned to rot in the futile armor which it could not wedge loose from the basalt vises. The horned quadrupeds with the light, quick feet stumbled and cut themselves on the sharp ridges, but they escaped and proceeded—till three out of four dropped in their tracks and perished of starvation.

Belshazzar now began gingerly picking his way over the sharp rocks. Was he abandoning the whole sublime project of herding a life's supply of living food over the bridge to a warm climate where he might round out his career with one gorgeous orgy of battle and luxury? For a moment we doubted our hero. He was turning back, northward, toward the dying continent. When we discovered his purpose we regretted that we could not tender him an apology.

THE next glimpse we got of Belshazzar was about two hours later, several miles north of the narrows. In his march south he had left many of the fleeing browsers far behind. He now went back to pay his respects. For the most part these were unsociable reptiles who shunned the main herds and made their solitary way along the edges of the bridge. Most of these hermits were slow moving monstrosities whose chances of reaching the southern continent were negligible. Instead of slowly starving on the scanty fare of the bridge they would have been much happier had they taken the six hundred foot plunge to the ocean.

On the main travelled path down the middle of the bridge Belshazzar met his first prospect. This amiable reptile was boldly plodding along in the most conspicuous manner possible, entirely confident of its immunity from attack. This was one of the hump-back monstrosities that walked like a camel. The triangular shields on its invincible backbone undulated gracefully as the ungainly beast swung steadily forward, its strong tail held stiffly off the ground. The tail, as we were to see in a moment, was even less inviting as a point of attack than the jagged back.

Masterful as ever, Belshazzar strode at once to the tiny head bobbing up and down on a stiffened six foot neck like that

of a tortoise. To reach the vulnerable part Belshazzar was forced to hump himself double. We expected to see the head and no inconsiderable length of the neck vanish when Belshazzar snapped his jaws tight shut, and I am sure we were quite as astonished as he himself was at the result. The neck and head vanished, it is true, but not into Belshazzar's jaws.

Like a stout rubber band being snapped back, neck and head vanished into that admirable reptile's interior. No startled turtle ever withdrew its head so quickly. Presently the wormlike head advanced an inch or two in its burrow, and we saw two bright green eyes peering down the tube. The monster could see perfectly what was in front of it. So why stick its head out, as it was going forward anyway? It continued to advance, swinging evenly along at an undulating gait which covered the ground surprisingly.

Belshazzar was infuriated. Possibly it was his first encounter with such a problem. We saw him tense his muscles for a leap to the ridge of shields. Then he changed his mind. Having had poor luck at the front end he would try the rear. One look was enough. He strode off toward the cliffs, almost dancing with rage. The massive, muscular tail of the amiable monster was a huge club bristling with two foot daggers of horn or bone like a giant's mace. One broadside from that murderous weapon could have smashed the ribs and punctured the lungs of any lizard on earth. The creature was indeed impregnable to any living enemy. Cold might make it miserable; hunger could conquer it in less than a week. We know that it never reached the narrows. It died in peace.

Along the cliffs Belshazzar's luck improved. An impressive procession of fourteen of the tank reptiles, like the one whose remains he had abandoned at the narrows, was moving slowly along the smoother rock at the edge of the cliffs. Hearing Belshazzar's battle cry they quickened their pace—a totally unnecessary manoeuvre we thought. Either they were impregnable as they were, and therefore beyond harm from any flesh-eater, or running would do them no good. The slowest of the bipedal lizards could have given them a ten mile start and beaten them without drawing an extra breath. This time Belshazzar made no mistake. Heading directly for the largest, who happened to be third in the procession, he walked directly to the creature's head. This unfortunate tank could not completely withdraw its head; Belshazzar might easily have snapped it off then and there had he wished. But he was not so foolish. What good would the immovable tank of meat be to him dead? To turn it over and expose its vulnerable underside was beyond his strength, tremendous though it was. He solved his problem with genius by compelling the tank to turn itself over.

One rough kick on the side of the head and two admonitory thumps on its horny top warned the tank that it must edge over toward the cliffs. We saw now why Belshazzar had picked number three out of the fourteen. Opposite this particular tank the basalt cliffs were not precipitous, but shattered and tumbled by earthquake shocks into a steep cascade of enormous blocks.

Shepherding his victim to the brink, Belshazzar ended the unhappy tank's indecision as it balanced crazily on the edge. He shoved it over by bracing his legs and humping his back against the bulging side. Still keeping his head, Belshazzar did not follow immediately, but waited till the bounding tank zigzagged its precipitous way to the inevitable end. Only when it struck a leaning black pillar and burst like a ripe watermelon did he begin to pick his cautious way down over the tumbled blocks.

Leaving him to his business, we attended to our own. Like most human beings, we were more shocked at the death of one by violence than at the slow elimination of hundreds by exhaustion and hunger or, what comes to the same thing, poverty. Accustomed as we were to the human scene, we found the merciless extermination of the majority of those who attempted the bridge less tragic than the death of the tank, merely because it was slower.

To get an adequate idea of what that natural murder by lack of food meat, Sellar suggested that we accelerate the record. We did so, and saw the wretched reptiles dying like butterflies in a snowstorm. Only the hardiest survived, and they reached the promised land so impoverished of spirit that for long they were unable to enjoy their heaven. It may be seriously doubted whether their reward was worth the effort of the earning.

Sellar's disagreeable passion for historical justice compels me to add one remark in extenuation of nature's apparent ruthlessness in this matter of the bridge. Unless

many of the vegetarians had perished on the way, Belshazzar, Jezebel, Bartholomew, and any other flesh eaters who happened to attempt the passage, must inevitably have died of starvation on the trek. Is there any particular virtue in preferring herbs to flesh, he asks, that one should be spared at the expense of the other, when the circumstances—lack of sufficient herbage on the bridge, among other things—were such that many of the herb eaters were doomed the moment they set foot on the basalt? The dinner is not always to the hungriest nor the tidbit to the greediest.

CHAPTER IV

THE SCIENTIST

NEARLY half a century elapsed before our friend with the three foot dagger and a passion for dueling found his way across the bridge. We recognized him instantly by his one broken dagger and the two scars symmetrically placed below his shoulder blades.

By sampling the record at five year intervals we had learned that a steady but alarmingly slim stream of refugees trickled over the bridge all through the fifty year period. Most of these were so exhausted when they finally set foot in paradise that they fell an easy prey to Belshazzar, Jezebel and Bartholomew, who seldom strayed very far from the source of supplies.

Our friend however came over romping, in splendid condition. Although he must have been approaching middle age—for a reptile—he was more active and fuller of the devil than he had ever been in his youth. Possibly the lack of a mate through his lonely years had something to do with his aggressive devilishness. We felt morally certain that he was the last of his kind.

His sound three foot dagger was still intact. It had earned him a good living. The harassed herd of exhausted herb eaters which preceded him by several hours bore many a mark of his efficiency as a herdsman on ill-protected backs. He seemed to have specialized in rounding up the sturdiest survivors of the fleet-footed chargers with the five horns—or sometimes as many as seven. These fierce creatures he had herded like cows after he succeeded in stampeding them onto the bridge.

Semi-starvation did the rest, till the roughest of them could not have launched a charge more dangerous than a kitten's. His first fights of course had been fair enough. That his stiletto and quick legs were superior to his cattle's numerous horns and nimble feet accounted for his own lusty buoyancy and their emaciated dejection. He had hustled them to the best of his ability, but they could not cover many miles a day on practically nothing to eat.

As this skillful dueler and expert herdsman was probably the last survivor of his tribe the engineers felt that he de-

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served a name. Taking everything into account—his striking appearance, his almost human cunning and his bachelorhood, they decided to call him Satan. The rest of us thought this somewhat of a libel on both parties, but let it pass. Indeed Sellar objected quite violently at first, claiming that the dueler had no right to be called after Milton's great hero, as Belshazzar, not he, was the undoubted ruler of the green paradise.

Belshazzar unfortunately was not present to receive Satan as the latter stepped jauntily off the harsh basalt of the bridge onto the first patch of bright green grass. At the moment the tyrant was fifteen miles away, giving all of his ingenuity to the solution of a difficulty which was rapidly becoming desperate.

The food supply was steadily diminishing, and what did find its way over the bridge made pretty lean picking. Bartholomew and Jezebel of late had even been reduced to faring farther and farther afield and smashing what diminutive mammals they could with their poor old awkward feet. Belshazzar left them practically nothing now. What he got was barely sufficient for his own gigantic frame. Soon it would be less than sufficient and then—well, it was better not to look too far into the future.

By his praiseworthy attention to the needs of himself and his camp-followers, Belshazzar missed the liberal supply of fresh meat which Satan imported. In all Satan contributed about twenty souls to the population. Bartholomew's dunderheadedness and Jezebel's greed squandered Satan's considerable gift in utter folly. Had Belshazzar been present things might have gone otherwise.

THE herd preceded Satan by about ten hours. Probably he had stopped for refreshments before undertaking the last lap. The smell of fresh greenery put new life into the starving monsters. Here was peace, here was food beyond their power to consume, here in short was heaven at last. They rushed into the thickets and tore at the ferns and shrubs.

For nearly ten hours the refugees stuffed themselves. Incidentally they completely incapacitated themselves for anything even faintly resembling a defense should they be suddenly attacked. So when Jezebel and Bartholomew returned from a three days' shopping expedition on the plain beyond the jungle, the plums almost fell into their jaws. Jezebel was so hungry that she attacked the herd from the rear without a moment's forethought.

It was the stupidest thing she could have done. Even the gorged guadrupeds were still capable of flight. Seeing one of their flock brutally murdered on the very threshold of what they had thought was paradise, they crashed through the shrubs and vanished down a deep ravine, swept along by the old familiar fear. That they would ever return to the vicinity of the bridge was extremely improbable.

Belshazzar would have patrolled the herd and kept it within easy reach. Jezebel had blundered precipitately and fatally, betrayed by her treacherous hunger. She was so hard pressed in fact that she permitted poor old Bartholomew to snuggle down beside her and share the feast.

Their foolish enjoyment did not last long. The racket of the fleeing herd as it crashed down the ravine reached Satan's ears as he stepped onto real grass at last. For a second or two he stood listening. Then he seemed to sniff. He smelt the old folks' dinner. The stubby tail flicked up perkily and he leapt forward in a joyous, skipping gallop. This was almost more than he had expected of heaven—to be met at the gates with a fresh dinner which he had not been forced to prepare himself.

The poor old folks had barely started when Satan burst in on them. Both heard him coming long before he arrived, but Bartholomew saw him first. To the old lizard's credit he instantly forgot his interrupted dinner. Here was a dangerous rival entering the field to compete for what remained of the shrinking food supply. The interloper should be eliminated immediately if he resisted deportation back over the bridge.

Satan resisted, vigorously. As Bartholomew flew at him with all the verve and fury of his forgotten youth, Satan charged without a moment's hesitation. Jezebel might have helped. But she lacked the wit to see that twenty meals in the future are better than one in the present—when it is not a question of actual starvation. Returning to her dinner, she let her mate take care of the enemy.

Bartholomew did his best. But his vision was not what it had been, and he misjudged his leap badly. Instead of landing squarely on Satan's head and shoulders as he had intended, he sailed clean over by a margin of at least two feet. Satan's accurate eye had foreseen what must hap-

pen. As Bartholomew sailed over his head like an eagle about to strike, Satan instantly put all the momentum of his irresistible charge into one magnificent leap. All of that leap was under the lunge of the three foot dagger which penetrated Bartholomew's back just above the pelvis. Satin staggered and all but lost his balance as Bartholomew lit and the dagger was disengaged by the momentum of the old fellow's leap. Quickly recovering he wheeled about and landed on Bartholomew's stomach the instant the wounded reptile's shoulder struck the dirt.

Satan got much more than he had bargained for. If it had been one of his own kind he was trampling he need not have greatly feared his enemy's hind legs. Their talons might have scratched him severely, but they could not have slashed him within danger of his life. Bartholomew was badly wounded, but he had fallen into the deadliest of his fighting postures and the pain of his grievous hurt restored all the fury of his terrible prime. Before Satan could escape, his tail and legs were badly gashed. The wounds were not serious—except for the maddened reptile that had inflicted them. Their stinging pain sent all the hate and murder in Satan's great body surging to his heart.

Even Belshazzar could not have faced the maddened stabber with impunity as he now was. He waited till Bartholomew got to his feet, so he could be reached easily. The valiant old fighter put all his courage into a noble attempt at a sailing leap. But the spurting wound had already drained much of his vitality, and the muscles of his legs, stiffening with pain, refused to function. The intended leap was a mere flutter. It landed him squarely in front of Satan, within easy reach of the waiting devil's arm. To Satan's credit it should be stated that he put his opponent out of pain as speedily as was possible. Whether the stab was at random or calculated we could not decide. It pierced Bartholomew's heart.

Even the killing of her mate—if she was aware of it—failed to distract Jezebel from the serious business of feeding her starved body. She might herself be slain within the next three minutes, but she was not going to face eternity on an empty stomach. Only when Satan charged at her back after finishing Bartholomew did she turn her snarling head. Something in Satan's aspect must have told her it was time to be off. With one last snarl of fiendish hatred she abandoned her kill and raced down the ravine after the retreating refugees. This was her second blunder, as we were presently to see. Any retreat—and there were several open—other than down the ravine would have been less stupid.

Under the circumstances there was but one course open to Satan, and he promptly took it. His tribe and Jezebel's were evidently hereditary enemies. Their feud seemed irreconcilable. So long as one remained alive to compete for the food supply which Satan had so efficiently shepherded across the bridge his own future was in danger. One opponent was disposed of; he must rout the other. With scarcely a passing glance at the tempting luxury all about him, Satan jerked his arms to the running balance and pelted down the ravine after Jezebel.

IT SEEMED pertinent to explain here that Belshazzar almost certainly was Jezebel's son. The numerous close resemblances of scale pattern and other distinguishing marks establish the kinship beyond any reasonable doubt. This is the considered opinion of the experts on the great sauria.

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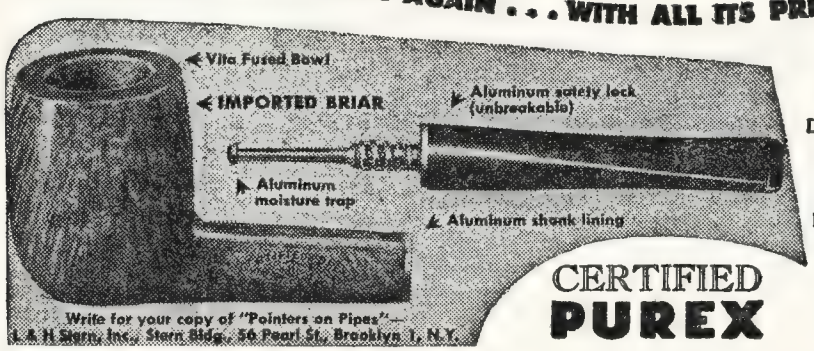
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The evidence regarding Bartholomew is less clear. The experts from the American Museum of Biological Science see much to substantiate Bartholomew's claim—if he would ever have made it—to be Belshazzar's father. Those from the corresponding British institution, on the other hand, fail to find indisputable evidence of any blood relationship between the two.

But to return to the record: Pursuit of Jezebel and Satan down the green gloom of the ravine being beyond the powers of the analyzer, the engineers canted forward and explored for its lower exit. This was found without difficulty, about fifteen miles in an airline from the entrance near the bridge. The exit was quite a respectable valley opening out on the gently sloping beach of the most beautiful lake we had ever seen. While waiting for Jezebel or the fleeing vegetarians to emerge we explored our perfect surroundings and silently estimated their potentialities of good or evil for those who had survived the discipline of the bridge.

To a casual inspection the spot was a nature lover's dream of heaven. No description of it could do it justice. I shall not attempt any, but merely catalogue the unmistakable evidences which at once caught our attention and seemed to prove that, whatever the super-structure of this thing of beauty might be, its foundations were probably sunk deep in a very fair copy of a mediaeval hell. The southern continent was about to part from its stricken neighbor slowly dying to the north, and this beautiful spot lay directly across one of the major planes of cleavage.

The four stupendous volcanoes which we had seen from the dying continent only as faint patches of slightly deeper blue against the blue of the sky, loomed up bold and black, snow-capped and furiously fuming against the horizon to the south. An unscalable wall of sheer precipices, ten thousand feet or more in height, linked the smoking four with an impassable barrier.

Whatever came over the bridge would have to make a long detour to the west to pass that barrier and escape to the savannahs to the south. No browsing reptile would be tempted to make the long journey while hundreds of miles of luxuriant forests lay between it and a doubtful freedom. Nor could any flesh eater reconcile his cold blooded body for perhaps years to the gloom of inhospitable forests where the herbage eaters were rarer than miracles. Only the ratlike, hairless mammals would make the journey, drawn ever southward by the promise of warmer lands which blew in every wind.

From the smoking cones our eyes dropped to the azure expanse at our feet. This beautiful water had variety and character. Never had we seen such marvelous blues as those of the lazy whirlpools which dredged up the brilliant sands from the floor of the lake and spun them into lazy patterns over the surface. Nor had we ever seen greener and fresher islands than the gems which flashed and sparkled less than a mile from the shore, as the wind set all the fronds of their glossy tree ferns tossing. The slowly rising steam from the black rocks at the base of the nearest but enhanced the beauty of the slight violet haze over the whole island; the wind quickly blew it away. We were to see much of this island, the most beautiful of all.

Looking farther down the black shoreline we gradually picked out one promontory after another jutting far out into the blue. As on the lake by the valley of the flies, we soon identified these promontories as huge tongues of smoking slag being slowly pushed out into the water, and we wondered whether the new continent and the new race upon it, just starting its long climb up the slope of evolution, were to be plagued as the old had been by fire and water, by submersions and centuries of appalling earthquakes. If so, anything approaching the violence of what we had witnessed is still in the future of our race. The scurrying mammals escaped the outburst which we saw in the brewing. Whether their descendants, including ourselves, are to escape the next major revolution—should there ever be another of any magnitude—is a question which may be left to those who believe in the invincible supremacy of the human race. We who saw the passing of the reptiles are too chastened at present to rush into rash prophecies.

JUST as the technicians began to get good results at the lower end of the ravine, the first of Satan's harassed herd staggered out.

The poor brute was on the point of collapse. After its heavy meal it should have had a fifteen hour sleep, not a fifteen mile race with two devils. But it had beaten Jezebel. That for the moment was sufficient.

But it was only for the moment. The others—such as made the descent at all—were but a few hundred yards behind.

Within ten minutes fifteen had blundered out on the slope leading to the lake.

Neither Jezebel nor Satan had yet emerged from the ravine. Sellar began to grow quite hopeful that one—he did not greatly care which—had murdered the other. As the minutes passed, and still neither appeared, his optimism rose to ridiculous heights. Just as he was on the point of wagering two to one that the laggards had succeeded in assassinating one another, Jezebel scuttled from the ravine. To anticipate slightly, I may report here that she had not eliminated Satan. Her greater familiarity with the shrubbery of the ravine had enabled her to win the race by nearly ten minutes, in spite of Satan's incomparably higher class as a runner.

The next ten minutes were crucial.

It began with a nerve-shattering roar. Of course we heard nothing. But we easily inferred the cause from the effect. Our friend Belshazzar had been basking on a suspiciously warm outcrop of rock jutting far into the lake just opposite the opening of the ravine.

The hapless refugees were now nearly trapped between two brute facts. Behind them Jezebel cut off retreat up the ravine; in front of them the terrible Belshazzar, hungrier than a fasting monk, strode up the sloping beach to pick off whichever one might take his fancy. They did the only sensible thing. Without blundering the fifteen split into two groups. Seven went east, eight west. Belshazzar leapt with rage. For once in his life he ran—and how he ran. The eight were his. To our amazement he did not run *after* them, but *before*. From behind he might have leapt down the slope, forty feet if necessary, and have knocked two out with the mere impact of his terrible talons before the bunch could have time to scatter.

Jezebel, to our way of thinking, showed better strategy. Had she been thirty years younger her poor legs would have been equal to the twenty foot leap which was all that separated her from the nearest of her seven. Drumming along at her hardest she let six go as they spread out like a fan, and pursued her victim to the very water's edge. Then we realized why Belshazzar's strategy was the superior, and began to guess why he happened to be sunning himself where and when he did.

Jezebel's awkward beast did not hesitate a second. Whether by instinct or from sheer fright it splashed straight into the water. Hearing the splash, Belshazzar involuntarily turned his head to see it. His too good memory had betrayed him. It was not the first he had heard, and all the chagrin of those other splashes lived again to taunt him with the remembrance of many good meals almost won and irretrievably lost. As his head turned and the great jaws gaped to hurl some deserved epithet at the blundersome Jezebel, his own eight scattered and raced around him to the water.

All fifteen now took to the water ungracefully but expertly and swam like hippopotamuses toward the green island.

To do Jezebel justice, it must be recorded that she did her poor old best to retrieve her heartbreaking blunder. But she could not swim. Her kind had never mastered the simple trick, being desert born.

As her intended victim splashed and gurgled its breathless way out, she leapt a good twelve feet over the hateful water and landed squarely on the swimmer's exposed buttocks. Two talons even dug a considerable foothold. But it was no use. The water was rapidly deepening, and the swimmer submerged for a moment, hurling the terrified Jezebel flat on her back in the wet she detested. Having dumped its passenger, the ferry proceeded on its swift

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way toward the island, two dark streaks crimsoning its wake.

Jezebel crawled out, spluttering and swearing, to find Belshazzar towering over her like the day of judgment. To say that there was murder in his eye is putting it mildly. She saw as much as we did, if not more. Hating the water only less violently than she hated Belshazzar, she gave a half flop and splashed clumsily back to the limit of her depth. She dared go no farther. Belshazzar ramped along the water's edge, calling down all the floods of heaven to dump their deluges on Jezebel's stupid head. He dared not wade in and drown her himself, for he hated like sin to get his feet wet. Once he accidentally came down with one smashing foot in about six inches of water and splashed the other leg and his tail. His rage at the mishap was the worst exhibition of fury we had yet seen from him. It was as inconceivable for him to wade out to Jezebel as it would be for any man in his right mind to walk over ten yards of red-hot plowshares with his eternal salvation as the reward for impossible success.

How the contest would have ended had not Satan intervened we cannot guess. Satan probably saved the day for poor old Jezebel. The uproar of Belshazzar's fury had reverberated far up the ravine, and Satan probably had mistaken the racket for old Jezbel's boastful challenge. Well, he was ready. Had he not recently slain her mate in a fair fight? He charged out of the ravine at top speed. Emerging onto the sloping beach he had difficulty in stopping himself in time.

It is extremely improbable that Satan remembered Belshazzar after nearly fifty years, in spite of the deep impression his three day flight before the marching tyrant must have made on his consciousness at the time. But whether Satan remembered Belshazzar or not, he recognized the devil when he saw him. With a scuffling slide he wheeled on the slope and raced back the way he had come.

Belshazzar immediately gave chase, marching up the slope with the long, even stride we remembered so well.

Not till Belshazzar disappeared behind a shoulder of the ravine did Jezebel venture to crawl out of her hateful bath.

FOUR days later Belshazzar strode out into the arena before the bridgehead, masterful and full of meat. Jezebel was again on the point of starvation, but he paid not the slightest attention to her; the episode of the swimmer was ignored. In spite of his repletion he was chilled to the bone. The green gloom of the ferny jungles had penetrated to his very marrows and he lusted for the sun. Striding past Jezebel he made his swift way to the basalts of the bridge, now black and sultry as Tophet in the early afternoon blaze.

Selecting the hottest spot he squatted, flopped sideways, rolled over on his back and let the grateful, sizzling sun cook the vast expanse of his mountainous belly through and through. Presently he was fast asleep, his hind legs trussed up like a roasting bird's, and his front talons resting lightly on his scaly chest. The enormous jaws gaped and he seemed to snore. Even in sleep he kept his head. The attitude of relaxed indolence into which he had flung himself was no brainless accident, but his most effective attitude of self defense.

Satan did not appear to share Belshazzar's siesta. The technicians reported him patrolling the beach at the lower end of the ravine. Evidently he had guessed Belshazzar's secret. While his enemy slept he paced the volcanic outcrop in the foolishly optimistic hope that some rash swimmer from the island would join him for dinner.

Only an occasional "calf"—green at life and ignorant of the tradition of his family—was silly enough now to attempt the swim to the mainland. Occasionally a frantic "cow," with the dawnings of a maternal instinct just lightening her darkness as her whole race was about to be extinguished forever, would swim after her foolish child and endeavor to head it back to the island. On such occasions Belshazzar was happy for nearly a week; some of the mothers were of gigantic bulk.

Leaving the technicians to keep an eye on Satan, we concentrated on the starving Jezebel.

HUNGER respects no law, human, natural or divine. So what Jezebel now attempted may be explained by an appeal to the old problem of the immovable body and the irresistible force. Belshazzar, snoring on his back on the sizzling rocks, was the immovable body. Jezebel foolishly solved the impossible problem by setting him in motion.

The sun was about to dip into the cold blue of the ocean when Jezebel stole up on the still snoring Belshazzar. She could stand the pangs of hunger no longer. What she now did was an act of blundering

madness, no matter how ravenous she was. For some seconds she stood perfectly still, hunched together for the battle leap. Then she thought better—or worse—of her intention, and limply straightened up. Belshazzar's terrific feet were still curled over his stomach in the ideal defensive position. Old Jezebel might have had a chance had she sprung clear of the hind feet to land squarely on Belshazzar's throat. A young, agile reptile might have killed him before the talons had time to come into action. But not Jezebel. Her decision did her intelligence credit.

Had she turned her back on temptation then and there she might have faced her last sunset side by side with her great son. But she was as hungry as hell. Like a poor, infantile old woman she stood shilly-shallying, unable to make up her mind. The sun had set, and it was fast growing dusk. Belshazzar began to stir uneasily in the rapidly chilling air. His unconscious movement roused all of Jezebel's ebbing courage to a futile, utterly silly exhibition of ineffectual bravery.

Walking round to the sleeper's side she raised her left foot and held it indecisively for fully three seconds above the enormous paunch. If she meant anything by her absurd antics she should have got at it at once, instead of dilly-dallying like a nerveless craven. She finally half made up her mind, and immediately changed it when it was too late. The net result of her indecision was an irritating four foot scratch, not deep enough to draw blood, across the tenderest region of Belshazzar's stomach.

In the rapidly failing light we lost the details of the sequel of Jezebel's rashness. Having attacked from the side she was clear of the first terrific slash, automatically delivered, of the murderous talons as Belshazzar's legs shot up, forward, and back, like released catapults. Already she was fleeing up the bridge toward the dying continent.

Belshazzar was not to be denied. He had been insulted; he would have his revenge.

He had it. Again, at the request of my collaborators, I suppress the scanty record caught before the darkness.

The sun rose red and angry over the deep waters of the channel at our left. We were on the basalt bridge, about ten miles from the shore of the southern continent.

The four stupendous cones to the south were in violent eruption. Even from our distance we clearly made out the torrents of lava rolling and tumbling their smoky rivers down to the lake.

Nature had decided to end an epoch. In this last outburst of a long revolution she wrote finis to the agelong epic of violence by severing the dying continent from its young sister to the south. The earth was exhausted and ripe for peace. But before peace could be established the very memory of old violence must be obliterated. We faced north to watch the end.

TO GIVE any adequate account of that last upheaval, which had been thousands of centuries in troubled preparation, would take a volume, and even then the story would not be half told—for no one could tell it. To be realized it must be seen in the records. By those living images any other restoration must be cold and trivial.

There is however one caution which must be repeated. The last upheaval of the revolution was no affair of a summer morning—as we humans think of summers and mornings. Before the last tremor of the final outburst died, the ratlike mammals had outgrown their insignificance, although man was still an undreamed of possibility far in the misty future, and their race had acquired the beginnings of natural dignity.

From the records of the final upheaval I shall select only those fragments which relate to Belshazzar, without attempting more than a bare statement of the necessary facts.

We faced north on the shaking bridge. As the true violence began, a black monster about a quarter of a mile away leapt snarling to its feet, abandoning the remnants of its ghastly feast, and strode toward us. Knowing what he had done we had difficulty in calling him by his old name Belshazzar. But as no one could think of a more suitable appellation, we swallowed our pharisaical human feelings and remembered that he was a reptile. Nature perfected him ages before she ever thought of us, and if she gave him a different set of tabus and a tougher ethical hide than our own, it was not for us to criticize him. And as for brute nature herself, she may continue to soften as she gets her bloody hand used to decent material. Nevertheless it cost us something of an effort to follow Belshazzar's movements with sympathy.

A major shock struck the bridge just as Belshazzar decided it was time to break into a run. At the moment he was about a hundred yards north of us, coming down the basalt causeway full tilt. His jaws parted in a defiant snarl just as the chasm

opened at his feet. If this was to be his end, then let it come, and be damned to it, to himself and to the whole world rising up against him. Never was a more perfect expression of contempt spat by any helpless creature at the tyrannical author of its darkened mind, its pain and its misery.

If this was not to be the end, he would not give in. To the last he would match strength against strength and what wits he had against blind chance. As the black mass beneath his feet heaved slowly over for the plunge to the sea, Belshazzar leapt like a gigantic bird. It was the leap of his life—nearly fifty feet. As he sailed over the chasm we thought he was done. But he was not. The rigid tail dipped slightly, shifting the centre of gravity so the straightened legs advanced the necessary yard, and his talons grasped the nearer lip of the chasm. Instantly the tail smacked up hard against the back, and Belshazzar pitched forward to safety. In a flash he was on his feet, leaping and racing his way over the jarring bridge as it crumbled like sand and cascaded in black torrents into the foam.

The worst of the shock passed before Belshazzar reached the mainland. Having followed him into the ravine, and having seen him safely started on his descent to the beach, we went in search of Satan.

Satan was, so to speak, in heaven. The sublime spectacle of four volcanoes belching up fire and brimstone meant nothing to Satan. And as for the earthquake, he had positively revelled in it. But for that rough prank of nature he might still be patrolling the lava spit as hungry as the devil with not a meal in sight.

The first severe shock had jarred the island to its very roots. Every living creature on it rushed down to the water and plunged in. "The mainland—the mainland," might have been their cry had they been capable of reason. It certainly would endure longer than the island, already beginning to smoke in a hundred places. Old and young, those who could swim and those who forgot how in their terror, strong and weak, big and little, splashed pell mell for the pitching shore.

Satan received them, joyously, precipitately. Fear of a killer of their own race vanquished fear of the universal destroyer, and as the first victim fell those who had reached the shore stampeded back into the boiling water. Two panic-stricken factions milled through one another in mid channel. Soon they were exhausted. Many drowned; only those on the rim of the mob made their way around it and back to the shaking island, and only one floating fortress drifted shoreward and crawled out on the mainland.

Satan paid no attention to the newcomer. It was impregnable, and he had all he could do for the present to dispose of the weakling he had killed.

WHILE waiting for Belshazzar to arrive we followed the progress of the eruptions. The lava had reached the forests, and to the murk of falling ashes was now added the pitchy smoke of blazing conifers. The visibility in our vicinity was still good, although the rocks were a sombre crimson and the vegetation almost black in the glare of a blood red sun.

I described the water of the lake as boiling, and to a certain extent this was literally true. Mud and sand were being churned up in prodigious quantities; great tracts of the surface of the water bubbled furiously, and steam drifted lazily from more than one expanse of comparative calm. Between us and the island however the water was still undisturbed, although as red and thick as paint.

Belshazzar arrived on the beach resolute and defiant. If nature chose to make a fool of herself by staging this ridiculous pantomime it was no concern of his. He had his own cattle to farm, and as long as he minded his own business he would continue to eat. Let the landscape play the fool if it liked; he had lived through almost as bad fifty years ago. In the hellish light his towering body glowed like a gigantic ember.

He strode down the beach toward his customary lookout. Suddenly he stopped, leaping with rage. Satan was defiling his favourite spot by celebrating some unclean rite of his own.

Satan looked up sharply. There was no mistaking that battle cry. Like a grotesque devil clambering out of the pit he pulled himself up by his hands, vaulted over a barrier of sombre red rock, and vanished in a flash of scarlet as the sun caught the lighter skin of his distended belly. He had dined long and completely, and now he was off. Belshazzar might have the uncracked skull and the tree sharp baby horns if he cared for them.

Belshazzar did not; a greater prize was his for the taking. The bewildered tank which had floundered ashore, already demoralized by the earthquake, lost its head completely when it saw this dancing apparition going mad on the beach. The

king and master of all devils had come in fire to judge the world.

As the awkward beast lumbered right about face and headed for the water, Belshazzar leapt upon its back, insane with rage. The racing feet sent sparks flying, but not even a minor injury was registered.

It was then that Belshazzar established his claim to intelligence beyond any reasonable shadow of a doubt. Noticing the swash of the waves, he ceased profitless ramping instantly and dashed for the rear end of the floating fortress. Twelve feet of water separated him from the shore. He could have made the leap without an effort, and for a moment the muscles of his legs tensed automatically. To escape the hated water was his natural impulse; his reaction was instinctive. Reason got the better of instinct—which is another way of saying that intelligence was born, if not already full grown but in abeyance. The muscles relaxed, Belshazzar wheeled about and strode to the forward end of the ferry, as it moved toward the island. Thirty feet from the shore he hunched down for an instant before he sailed like a bird high up to an overhanging ledge of black rock. In another instant he had crashed through the brake of tree ferns and vanished.

That last leap clinched his title to—whatever Langtry claims in his behalf. For the shore at that point was precipitous, without an inch of beach. A landing for the floating tank at that spot was impossible. The bewildered creature lacked the wits or the intelligence to swim around half a mile till it found a beach. Turning tail as it crashed head-on into the cliffs, it paddled frantically for the shore which it had left. We abandoned it there.

Forty-eight hours of the utmost violence obliterated the record in swirling clouds of crimson and black. An occasional spurt of clearer flame revealed splinters of red rock being thrust steaming up from the floor of the lake, only to vanish as if snatched down to the seething fires by invisible hands for more thorough smelting. Bridges were elaborated and destroyed in a second; the lake was twice drained for miles from the shore and twice refilled with clashing waters in less than an hour, and gradually more permanent structures began to emerge.

A smoking causeway united the island to the mainland, and seemed to survive the assaults of the earthquakes for several hours. At intervals all through the second night we caught flashes of this smouldering causeway still intact, but still too hot to bear a living foot. Then, at the very peak of the violence which within five minutes shattered the causeway and tilted the island crazily so that its whole western half was submerged, we saw Satan.

He was not on the causeway—its scorching rocks would have burned his feet to wisps in twenty yards—but far out in the water, galloping knee high parallel to the causeway. In the flash we caught of him he was running—or rather splashing—along the cooler floor of the lake, now elevated to within a yard or two of the surface by the upheaval of the causeway. The muscular arms swung at the running balance, and the long dagger flashed back and forth in the crimson light, redder than it had ever been in any of its hundreds of fights, fair or foul.

WE HAD almost given up hope of getting a decipherable record when Sellar remembered that volcanic eruptions are usually accompanied by deluges of rain—for simple reasons that need not be gone into here. Our slogan became "Wait for the rain," while the engineers continued to run the specimens through the analyzer at half the natural rate.

As Sellar had anticipated, the deluge was not long delayed. It registered in the record by a gradual strengthening of the light and a general sharpening of image. Colors began to appear—muddied, it is true, owing to the superposition of the universal red—but still colors. At this point the specimens being analyzed exhibited serious defects (not yet remedied), so we cannot say how many hours or days of real time passed before the deluges cleared the atmosphere and the downpour finally ceased.

The air was as clear as glass. Lava had ceased temporarily to gush from the erupting cones, but they were still active. The lake was a slaty expanse of thick, bubbling mud broken by a confusion of jagged outcrops of black rock. The island had been all but submerged; a scant half acre of scorched greenery sloped steeply down to the boiling mud, and even this had been penetrated by the savage upthrust of a huge splinter of shattered rock as sharp as a trainload of scrap iron. Supporting the green slope an upturned wall of basalt leaned up at an angle of forty-five degrees from the bottom of the lake. This wall was one boundary of the fracture which had split the island in two; the rest of the island was sunk in the boiling mud. Only

this scorched fragment remained of the reptiles' last refuge.

Knowing Belshazzar as we did we confidently expected to find him somewhere on that last fragment. His invincible resourcefulness surely had been able to overcome nature's hit or miss methods, and he could not have failed to find himself on the one scrap of the island, no matter how small, which had not been snatched into the boiling mud.

The causeway had long since disappeared. There was now no link with the mainland. Nevertheless we felt that Belshazzar somehow would find a way to get ashore in the next outburst—whose signs were already evident in the fuming cones. They were streaming up again for a major eruption, and no doubt there would be sudden outcrops in the mud by which Belshazzar could leap ashore. Nothing could down him, we felt, not even the supreme anarchy to come.

The broken crest of the scorched greenery shook vigorously. We almost felt Belshazzar coming.

The ferns parted; a birdlike foot hesitated and advanced. Satan stepped out. To hoist himself up the last yard of the steep slope he grasped a jagged spear of the over-hanging rock by crooking the stubby fingers of his hand with the sound three foot dagger, and pulled. His weight was too much for the fractured rock. The spear toppled. As he leapt back another loosened mass of rock shot after the spear, struck his hand, and broke the dagger off short.

"If he murdered Belshazzar," Sellar remarked, "it serves him right."

The words were barely uttered before Belshazzar appeared. He had heard his enemy, and no doubt had been stalking him. Limping badly he made his precarious way around the splinter, hugging the rock. Satan had disappeared into the tree ferns. Belshazzar did not pursue—he hated gloom. As if this were a normal sunny afternoon he clawed his way round to the front of the splinter where the sun was hottest, leaned his back against the rock, and eased himself into a sitting posture, letting his tail flop carelessly to the ground.

Leaning back, he stared at the sun and let its beneficent rays cook him through and through. His paunch, we noted without surprise, was distended to the natural limit. Belshazzar cared not what nature might do; he would continue to live a normal, happy life.

As his eyes closed and his enormous head nodded toward his shoulder, we noticed for the first time that he was badly wounded. The longest talon of his left foot was crushed. His days of leaping were over. Nature had got the better of him by one of her usual low subterfuges. Instead of killing him outright she had condemned him to death by starvation.

WAS Belshazzar defeated? The drum-tight expanse of his paunch shouted that he was not. So long as his unwilling ally Satan would continue to herd timid cattle into pens from which only the bravest might hope to escape, Belshazzar was not downhearted. Instead of moping over his crushed talon and the blank, black future, he snored like a Roman emperor after a debauch and put his trust in Satan. Should the worst come to the worst, Satan himself would provide at least one square meal. Belshazzar was still equal to the task of dressing the devil for dinner in spite of his injured foot.

Within ten minutes of sunset Satan put in his first appearance since losing his dagger. One glance at his sagging belly proved his hunger. Coming round the splinter from the back, he lost not a precious second.

This resolute devil was no shilly-shallying craven like the wretched Jezebel. Although one dagger was completely gone, and the other was but a blunt stub, he charged. Even the charge was but a broken parody of what it might have been in a fair fight, as there was no take-off worth mentioning. Habit overmastered him, and he struck with all his strength at Belshazzar's throat—with the wrong thumb.

Belshazzar was now on his feet. Instinctively he tried to spring, and failed. The injured foot collapsed. He lost his balance and crashed into the splintered rock. Satan was on him in a flash, stabbing blindly with both thumbs at Belshazzar's throat as a great slab of rock pinned the king of reptiles to the ground. The blunt stump of a dagger tore a great gash in Belshazzar's throat and the blood spurted like wine from a cask when the spigot is knocked out. As Satan leapt upon him, the thrashing tail broke both the devil's legs and as he fell, came down in one terrific slash which broke his neck.

The sun set and the evening star stole out. Belshazzar raised his head. The last light died in his eyes as the head dropped back, the unconquerable jaws still wide in their last snarl of defiance.

(Continued from page 8)

stories and a new cover layout with the title occupying less room.

Good luck in the future.

K. STIRLING MACOBOY.

"Shelcote,"
25 Shell Cove Rd.,
Neutral Bay,
Sydney, N.S.W.
Australia.

AIRMAN LIKES "FANTASTICS"

Even though in service, I have usually been able to keep up on most magazines of "fantastic" nature. Usually, also, I am content with the stories in these. Other readers praise or gripe, but a variety is usually selected by the editors, and everyone gets something that they want.

I would like to get the address of Gwen Cunningham who wrote quite a lengthy letter on "Phra the Phoenician." I don't understand why she put up such a defense of the story just because she enjoyed Arnold more than Merritt.

I would like to discuss stories and swap opinions with her. If you have the return address, I would appreciate it very much. Thanking you in advance, I remain,

RALPH BENNETT KEETON, RM3/c.

N.A.S. Communications,
Corpus Christi, Texas.

PAGING GWEN CUNNINGHAM

By accident, Gwen, the envelope bearing your address was lost, and you did not repeat the address on the letter inside. Will you please let us have your address to publish in the next issue of F.F.M.? Also, please note the request of Ralph Keeton in this department.

WANTS MORE HAGGARD YARNS

Enclosed is my check for a year's subscription to F.F.M. and the Lawrence Portfolio.

Your magazine is undoubtedly the finest on sale of the beautiful and rare works that you have published, I believe that I enjoyed reading "The Man Who Was Thursday" more than any so far since Popular Publications took over F.F.M. However, "The Ancient Allan" runs a close second. All of your stories are superb but some, naturally, are better than others.

Please give us more Haggard. His adventurous fantasies are perfectly suited for F.F.M. "She"—"Ayesha"—"Allan and the Ice Gods."

Lawrence's intricate pen-work enthralls me. Next to Finlay and Paul he is the top-notch artist of fantasy.

Now with the war's end, I do hope that your magazine will return to its monthly schedule. Also what's the chance of reviving the old F.N.?

I am looking forward with great eagerness to the peacetime *Famous Fantastic Mysteries.*

VERNON D. HODGES.

P.O. Box 28,
Denair, Calif.

Editor's Note: The subscription to F.F.M. beginning with the March issue is $3.00 a year. With the Lawrence Portfolio, $3.25.

DEC. ISSUE "MARVELOUS"

I've just finished the Dec. F.F.M. To put it mildly, it was marvelous. I devoured it at a single sitting.

Stories: 1. "The Ancient Allan" was one of the best stories Popular has printed in F.F.M. What I like was that there were no long, complicated, scientific explanations, telling how or why some machine worked as it did. I, for one, don't care why. Besides, I hardly ever understand such explanations. Haggard starts his stories off slowly but completely enthralls you once you're started. More Haggard stories, please, but not the easily obtainable ones like "King Solomon's Mines" or "Allan Quatermain." 2. "The Hashish Man"—I like Dunsany's style; he interests you. But I simply don't "get" his stories. "The Hashish Man" was terrible.

Art: The cover was very good, the color scheme striking, but Amada's face was anything but life-like. It looked as if it was carved, not painted, and not very well either. Lawrence's insides pics were really something. I'm glad to see all but one were full page. There wasn't one I wouldn't want to have in another Lawrence Portfolio.

I would like to make some suggestions, none original, in the hope they will be the straw that breaks the camel's back. 1. With the war over and the end of the paper shortage near—monthly publication. 2. Trimmed edges. 3. Revival of F.N. to publish only mag. classics. 4. Bring back the Editor's Page.

CHARLES FEIGENBAUM.

101 Division Ave.,
Brooklyn 11, N. Y.

SUGGESTIONS

You are to be congratulated on an excellent magazine. The December issue was superb. Cutcliffe Hyne's story was wonderful reading. The "Highway Man" was an excellent choice.

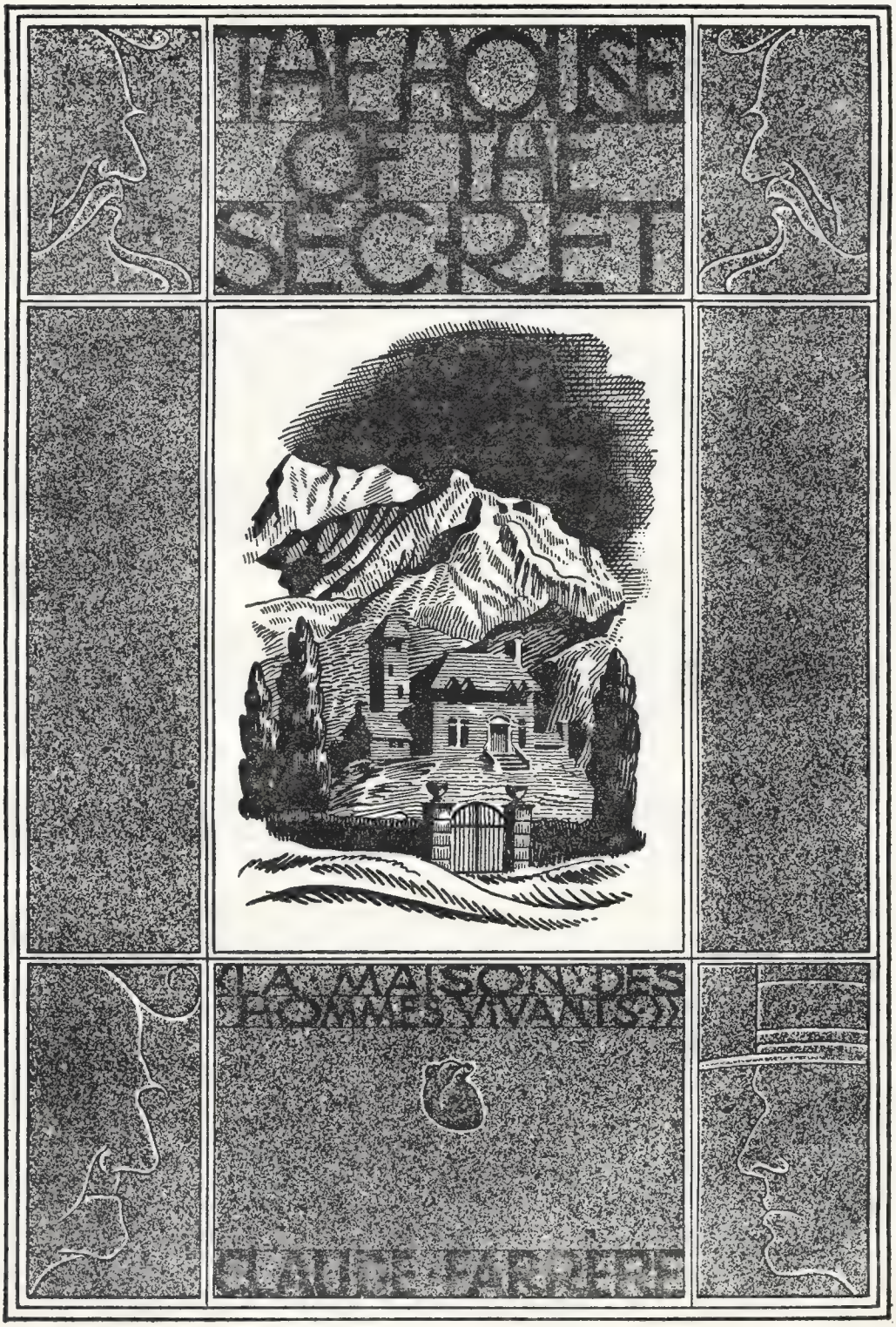
Now to the real reason for this letter: The question of suitable future stories. By all means publish "The Willows." This and "The Wood of the Dead" are in my opinion Blackwood's best stories. The sheer beauty of the latter has not been equalled by anything you have published to date. A word of advice. "The Ghost Book" chosen by Colin De la Mare contains some brilliant fantasy. I urge you to print some of these stories. Others which I think will be well worth publishing are "The Gardener" from "Visible and Invisible" by E. F. Benson, "The Facts in The Case of Mr. Valdemar" by Poe, plus that brilliant story "The Horla" by DeMaupassant. I would also like more Machen, Blackwood and Dunsany.

T. MASTERS.

55 Fairview Ave.,
Woodstock
Capetown
So. Africa.

Editor's Note: We have published "The Horla" in F.F.M. We shall publish stories from Benson's "Visible and Invisible" and also more Machen, Blackwood, and Dunsany.

(Continued on page 127)



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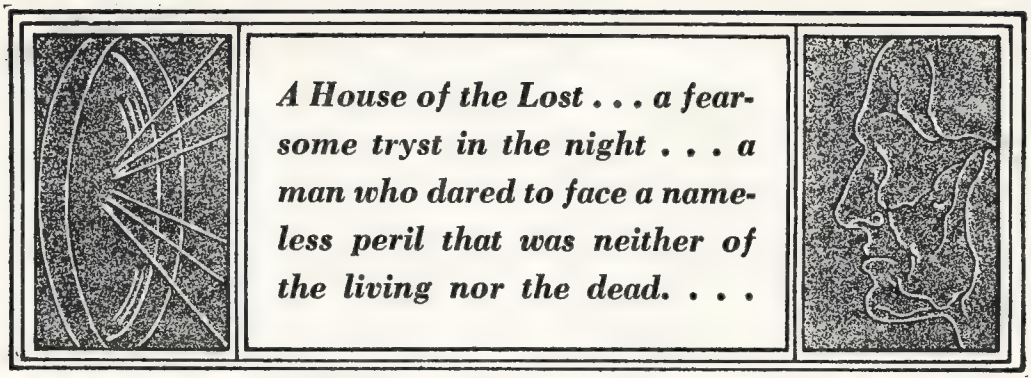

A House of the Lost . . . a fearsome tryst in the night . . . a man who dared to face a nameless peril that was neither of the living nor the dead. . . .

CHAPTER I

THIS day, January 20, 1909, I have decided to set my story down in writing. Dangerous and terrifying the task! But I must perform it. For day after tomorrow I shall be dead. Day after tomorrow. . . . Just two days! And death from old age! Of this I am as certain as a man can be of anything. What, then, have I to lose by speaking?

Speak I must!

That much I owe to the unsuspecting men and women who are to survive me. They are in danger; and I must warn them. . . . Day after tomorrow I shall be safe. Day after tomorrow I shall be dead. . . . And this is my own hand! To all men and women, my brothers and my sisters, I bequeath—a Secret, *the* Secret. May my death serve as a warning to them, one and all! Such is my last will and testament. . . .

Now I am quite in my right mind—let there be no doubt of that. I am sound, absolutely sound, in mind and, for that matter, in body. I have never known what it means to be sick. But I am old, old beyond human experience of age. How old, I wonder? Eighty? A hundred? Make it a hundred and fifty! It really doesn't matter. I have nothing to decide the question. You may find my birth certificate, papers I may have written, people who may have known me. Such things would not help. Not even my own sensations give me any accurate impression of my actual age. I have been old for such a very few days! I have had no time to grow accustomed to the sudden change. There is no comparison, either, between my absorption of the centuries and ordinary old age—this last, indeed, has never been mine. I became what I am instantaneously, one may say.

I am cold, inside here, in my blood, in my flesh, in my bones. And tired, horribly, unendurably tired, with a fatigue that sleep cannot alleviate! My arms and legs are heavy and my joints are stiff. My teeth are chattering. I cannot bring them together on my food. I struggle to stand erect; but my shoulders stoop inexorably. I am hard of hearing. My eyes are dim. And these infirmities are the more excruciating because they each are new. No living man, I am sure, has ever been quite as miserable as I.

But it will all be over in two days! Forty-eight hours! Two thousand eight hundred and forty-eight minutes! What is a matter of two days? The prospect fills my heart with hopefulness; though death, in itself, is a terrible thing, far more terrible than living men imagine. That I know, as no one else knows. But I am ready! The life I am leading has ceased to be anything resembling life.

So then, I am in my right mind. My head is clear. Furthermore, I am about to die. Two considerations, these, that should dispel all doubt as to my veracity. A man does not lie when he stands on the threshold of Eternity! So I beg of you who find this little book of mine, of all you who read this story of my adventure—in the name of your God, if you have one, do not doubt me! I am not spinning you a yarn, nor telling you a tale for an idle hour. A great danger hangs over you, over your son, your daughter, your wife, your dear ones! Do not scorn my warning, therefore! Do not shrug your shoulders, or tap your forehead! I am not a lunatic! And death is standing near you! Do not laugh, either. But read, understand, believe—and, then—do as your best judgment dictates.

Forgive me if I write with a trembling

hand. The words may seem faint, almost illegible, at times. I found a pencil lying in a gutter on the roadside. Its point is dulled, and it is too short for my stiffened fingers. And this paper—from a funeral register—is not of the best. Its broad black border leaves very little space and compels me to cramp my lines. A broad black border!

How convenient! And yet how appropriate! This funeral page is perchance the only appropriate medium for such a story as mine!

Here I begin. And again I beg of you; doubt me not, but read, understand, believe!

IT ALL started with a letter from Colonel Terrisse, commander of field artillery, to Vice-Admiral de Fierce, commander-in-chief of the Western Mediterranean, prefect of the Maritime reserve, line-officer, and governor of the fortress of Toulon. The letter in question came in to Staff Headquarters by the evening mail of Monday, December 21, 1908. Notice now! That was the 21st of this *last* December. It is now the 20th of January, 1909. Not quite a month ago! It will be a month tomorrow, day for day.

A month! One single month! Gods of Heaven and Hell!

The Colonel's letter reached Headquarters by the evening mail—military headquarters, you understand, not naval. At Toulon, as is the case with similar stations, the vice-admiral in command functions in a double capacity as maritime prefect and military governor. His residence is the mansion of the prefecture; while his adjutant occupies the governor's house. There are thus separate offices communicating by telephone. The wire is for obvious reasons a private one, independent of the city "central."

I was in the officers' room when the mail came in; and I opened the letter. Among my duties was that of reading and sorting the correspondence of the military commander.

I was certain of the cavalry detailed to the General Staff. I was young—just thirty-three—thirty-three, mark you! And that was less than a calendar month ago!

Four weeks and two days ago, to be exact. Four weeks and two days—an eternity. . . .

I opened the letter; and read it. It was a matter of no great interest that I could see. I am going to transcribe it textually, however, for I can see it right before me now.

XVth Army Corps

FORTRESS OF TOULON

Toulon, Dec. 21, 1908

Corr. No. 287
Re: *Broken Telegraph Wires*
Vice-Admiral Charles de Fierce,
Commander-in-Chief of Western Mediterranean,
Headquarters, Navy Yard, Toulon.

Sir:—

I have the honor to report that telegraph poles Nos. 171, 172, 173, 174, 175 are down as the result of a wash-out occurring on Dec. 19th last, and that, in consequence, the Tourris-Grand Cap line is out of commission.

I have issued the necessary orders for repairs. In view of the heavy rains and the long distance the repair crew will have to cover over muddy roads, it is probable that the poles cannot be in place again under forty-eight hours. All communication by wire between Toulon and Grand Cap will accordingly be impossible for that length of time.

I have the honor to be, sir,
Your Obedient Servant,
Terrisse,
Colonel-in-Command of Field Artillery.

I need not observe that, in peace times, Toulon and the Grand Cap have nothing of importance to say to each other, with the single exception of days when there is target practice. The Grand Cap is one of the mountains in the chain east of Toulon. It is a bold, forbidding pile of rock, crowned with a modern and fairly strong battery. Ordinarily the place is held by a corporal's guard, a full garrison being stationed there only during periods of manoeuvre. The country around the mountain is a rough uncultivated heath virtually uninhabited. Charcoal burners camp there from time to time; but there are no farms nor permanent settlements. The wire leading to that God-forsaken place could be down for more than two days without the world's coming to an end on that account! I was intending to file the colonel's letter and let it go at that, when the telegraph corporal knocked at the office door.

"A call for you, Captain," he said, "from Naval Headquarters!"

"I'll be there directly," I replied.

It was three P. M., to the minute.

phone booth in the adjoining room.

I took up the receiver.

The voice calling me by name over the wire, was, as I recognized to my surprise, that of Vice-Admiral de Fierce, himself.

"Hello! That you, Narcy!"

"At your service, Admiral!"

"Barras tells me you have a horse down at Solliès-Pont. Is that right?"

"Quite so, Admiral. I left my bay down there, last night."

"What condition is he in? Pretty good?"

"Excellent! Hasn't worked for some days. I was intending to use him tomorrow, for the inspection at Fenouillet."

"Splendid! However, the inspection at Fenouillet is off. But I've got a dirty job to attend to; and I don't see anybody handy except you."

"Quite at your service, Admiral!"

"Good! . . . You know the wire is down between here and the Grand Cap?"

"I just received a letter to that effect from Colonel Terrisse."

"Now that's a nuisance, just at this moment. The guard up at the battery there must be informed at all hazards that the seventy-fives will be working over at Roca-Troca tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, Admiral?"

"Yes, firing starts at noon. We can't put it off, because General Felte must get away from Toulon tomorrow night at the latest. They're going to shell the approaches to the mountains; and we've got to warn any wood-choppers there may be in the neighborhood. Otherwise somebody will be getting hurt! What time is it now, Narcy?"

"Three five, Admiral."

"How far do you make it, from here to Solliès-Pont?"

"Ten or twelve miles."

"Good! Well, telephone your orderly . . . you have a man down there, haven't you? . . ."

"Yes, Admiral!"

"Well, tell him to get your horse ready and bring it to you somewhere along the road. . . . Are you in uniform?"

"No, Admiral, military regulations permit civilian after luncheon as you know. I am wearing a riding suit, however, with boots and spurs. I was thinking of trying out Colonel Lescaut's new mare this afternoon."

"Fine! I'll send my car over to get you in five minutes. My man will drive you down to Solliès-Pont, and you'll be there by three forty. There's no way of going on by auto, is there?"

"To the Grand Cap? Impossible, Admiral. Even Valaury is difficult for wagons."

"You know the way?"

"I think so. I went over the ground once last year, during evolutions. Beyond Valuary you have to take a trail, a sort of mountain road."

"But a horse can do it?"

"It was on a horse that I went there."

"Very well, then. Try to make it. But the Grand Cap is a good hour and a half beyond Solliès-Pont, and it gets dark at five. You understand that?"

"I'll spend the night up on the Cap, of course."

"Yes. And it won't be so bad. There's an officers' building there with good beds. The guard will fix you up. And you can come back in the morning. Sorry to give you a job like this, Narcy. But I don't just see any other way out of it. We've got to get word to the people there. I had thought of sending a car around, by way of Revest. But just our luck! The road is torn up all the way from Ragas to Morière. The simplest thing is for someone who knows the road to ride out from Solliès-Pont. And you seem to be the only man in sight."

"Glad to be of use, Admiral. Your car is here now. I hear the engine out in the yard."

"Be sure to telephone your man at Solliès-Pont."

"The corporal will do that for me. I'm off without losing a second's time!"

"And ever so much obliged, eh, Narcy? Call and see me when you get back!"

I hung up the receiver. The telegraph corporal was standing outside the booth with my water-proof and my soft felt hat. A misty rain was falling outside.

I hurried back into the office, gave a turn at the combination on the safe, and locked the cabinet for the correspondence files. This latter operation wasted a good half minute. The lock was out of order and refused to turn. After some cursing on my part, it yielded to the key.

Through the white lace curtains hanging over the office windows a bright, though grayish light was streaming in from the waning afternoon. The stove was glowing red, giving the room a touch of cosiness that I was to exchange with some regret for the raw damp outside.

On the table I noticed Colonel Terrise's letter, which, in my haste, I had forgotten to file. I thought of opening the cabinet again. But no, that would take too much time. Not knowing what else to do with the letter, I folded it and slipped it into the inside pocket of my waistcoat. . . . That is why I can see it now!

In the courtyard of Headquarters a hostler was currying the adjutant-general's mare. He spat out the stub of his cigar and saluted me. In the west, a dim outline of the sun was visible through a thin place in the clouds. A tree nearby was dripping with great drops of moisture. The swinging of the outer gate rang a bell in the sentinel's box. I remember that a dog, sleeping inside, raised his head lazily and looked up.

Beside the curbing on the street, the Admiral's auto was standing, its sixty horsepower motor purring softly but powerfully. I opened the side door and stepped in....

We were off!

AT THE corner of Rue Revel and the Place de la Liberté we skidded as the chauffeur turned sharply to avoid a child playing just off the sidewalk.

We slowed down along the Boulevard de Strasbourg on account of crowded traffic. I was shaken up as we stopped short under the Porte Nôtre Dame to prevent collision with a truck.

We sped along through the Faubourg de Saint-Jean-du-Var between two rows of tall narrow houses propped one against the other. Every three quarters of a mile we passed a trolley car. Some workmen were repairing the road under the railroad bridge. They had to jump to get out of our way; but a train passing overhead drowned the curses they sent after us.

It had stopped raining; but the road was still wet and slippery. The gray sky seemed to reach down and touch the roofs of dark tiling. Not a ray of sunshine brightened the landscape, depressing under the best conditions, but ghastly now under that mournful light.

We reached the outskirts of the settled region. One straight unbroken line of mud, the road reached out into the foggy heath. Here now to the left the foothills of the Faron were rising one above the other. I leaned out over the running board to get a good look at the top of the mountain. A thick bank of fog was hiding it from view. That was bad! The Grand Cap was higher still. I might have some trouble in groping my way along, and I might easily take the wrong trail. Yes, that was something to think about. . . . Though it worried me only for an instant.

The village of Valette, the first town outside Toulon in the direction of Nice! We were making forty miles an hour. Children scampered this way and that to get off the road ahead of us, screaming at the top of their voices. I looked at my watch. It was twenty-six minutes past three. I pulled the wind shield down and nudged the chauffeur with my elbow.

"We can speed her up now, eh, till we get to the bad road?"

"Yes, Captain."

The auto lunged ahead at a fifty-mile clip. The macadam lay straight and level ahead of us. Here was the hamlet of La Garde, perched on its hill-top around its dilapidated castle. The train of thought was quite involuntary—but these ruins brought back to my memory a woman's face—the face of Madeleine, Madeleine de. . . . I almost betrayed her name . . . whom I had met just a year before in those self-same ruins.

The old walls stood out with their battlements cut clean against the darkening sky. The plain below was a naked, leprous tangle of stupid olive-trees. . . . But that day, I had crossed the courtyard of the castle; and, I remembered, behind the tower I had spied the slender, agile form of a woman. She was a sight-seer, probably, resting for a moment on the top step of the stairway leading to the old postern. My heels clacked on the pavement, and she looked around my way—a dazzling vision of greenish golden hair, with eyes of emerald.

Madeleine. . . . How endlessly, limitlessly far away all those days now seem! But they are so remotely past for me, alone. That woman is still alive . . . still young . . . still beautiful. Indeed it were indiscreet to give even the four syllables of her name. But there are so many Madeleines in the world—Madeleines even with hair of greenish gold and emerald eyes!

Still at fifty miles an hour we swept into and through the village of Farlède. A mile or two ahead the first houses of Solliès-Pont were coming into view.

I looked at my watch. Three thirty-nine! At three forty, to a second, we reached the turning where a road makes off from Solliès-Pont to Aiguiers and thence toward the Grand Cap. My orderly was waiting there, holding my horse playfully by the nose. We stopped so short that I struck hard against the wind-shield with my chest.

A moment later I was in the saddle.

Some women of the village sat looking at me with interest from their door-steps. They thought the speed of my arrival and the suddenness of my departure were a bit suspicious. I remember hearing one of them remark in a shrill Provençal dialect:

"Anyhow it's not the kind of weather for a dress parade . . . no pretty girls are out!"

I believe those were the last words I heard that day . . . that day, which was the last day of my life, really. . . .

I TOOK the Aiguiers road. The going was good—not too slippery, not too hard. My horse was trotting cheerfully along, at an easy swinging canter.

He was a fine animal and I loved him—a perfect Arles thoroughbred, high in the withers, short in the cropper, with a fine spread of neck and shoulders. A courageous fellow, too, and so good-natured! I had picked him out at my leisure and just to my taste, during a turn of duty at the ministry in Paris. There you have facilities for such things that officers in garrison never dream of. . . . I called him Siegfried. We had come to know each other very well; and, in all our intimacy as comrades, I never discovered a defect in him worth mentioning.

Siegfried took me to Aiguiers without stopping once for breath. Aiguiers is a little cluster of houses backed up against one of the last foot-hills of the Maurras chain. Beyond there, the road began to get more difficult. It ran along a hillside above a ravine cut deep by the Gapeau. There were sharp turns conforming to the twists in the bed of the little torrent, where the water mirrored gray with the pallor of the leaden clouds.

It now began to rain again, in huge drops that made visible circles in the silent pools of the stream. I suggested a gallop to Siegfried. Away off to the right the bell-tower of Solliès-Toucas pierced a clump of cherry trees. Then the road turned sharp to the left hiding the distant village from view. Now there was nothing ahead but deserted country, on which the sky was raining in a thick, dispiriting drizzle.

Halfway up a steep fold in the ground, Siegfried slowed down to a walk. The other side was a more gradual slope, the inner rim of the great bowl of Valaury—a sort of crater, half filled, and perhaps two miles in diameter. Now the Grand Cap, hitherto concealed by the Maurras ridge, was in plain view. It came forward, as it were, out of the rains, sullenly dominating all the smaller hills around it. But its peaks were quite invisible, lost in the ceiling of clouds. It was nothing but a truncated cone, a huge pillar propping up the leaden architecture of mist and sky above it. Stray flecks of fog were wandering here and there along its sides, drifting slowly down to the break between the heath and the farm lands.

For a second time the danger of going forward into that thick and sticky gloom occurred to me. Even if I found the trail, it might be hard, if not impossible, to keep to it. . . . But, for the moment, the floor of the basin was clear and the path before me broad and level. A word to Siegfried and he joyfully resumed his gallop.

Madeleine had often gone with me on early morning rides. There in the pine groves, which drape the Points of Cépet and Sicie in gorgeous green, we would trot along side by side inhaling the cool, resinous air. The memory came to me at just this moment; for the evening breeze was rising and I had breathed it deeply in. It felt damp and musty to my lungs, polluted with a strange odor of rotting leaves and oozing ground. I straightened up in my saddle for a deeper breath, a keener sense, of the uncanny smell. Yes, it was the same as before—and the queer notion came to me that it was the breath of the mountain, close, cadaverous, nauseous. A creeping, disagreeable chill ran over me!

Siegfried, meanwhile, was galloping on; but in a moment or two I reined him in. We were well across the bowl, and the other slope, steep and slippery, was before us. At the top of a knoll four huts were gathered in jumbled array. No one seemed to be living in them, but a dog came out and sniffed at Siegfried's heels, without, however, barking.

We came to a fork in the trail. I stopped to consult my military map and get my bearings. Straight in front of me, the Grand Cap blocked the horizon with a formidable chaos of precipitous rocks. Its first foothills were perhaps a mile and a half ahead. Now this was east; so north would be on my left hand. I studied the map for a while. It was not so very clear, but I did make out the fork where I then was standing and the two paths between which I had to choose. So far as I could see, they both led up to the battery; the one to the right, by way of the old convent of Saint Hubert and the village of Morière-la-Tourne; the one to the left, through the hamlet of Morière-les-Vignes and Morière itself. I decided to take the latter route.

Had I selected the other, Adventure doubtless would have missed me!

As I went on again, I thought I could make out a sort of pinkish cast to the

clouds heaped up along the mountain. I was headed west now. That radiance must be, therefore, a shaft from the setting sun making its way through the bank of mist and fog. Before long it would be pitch dark. Instinctively, I looked back to the eastward, better to gauge the approach of night; and frank uneasiness came over me as I thought of the long distance still to go. Darkness, indeed, had already settled on the plains. It was climbing the heights of Soliès, engulfing the basin of Valaury, and striding rapidly, stealthily, along up the mountain trail behind me. Now it was passing us, reaching the dangerous slopes of the mountains far ahead. The path was barely perceptible, and Siegfried kept slipping alarmingly.

For the first time, I clearly realized that my mission involved far greater risks that an uncomfortable night of wandering out in the cold and rain.

IT MUST have been somewhere on the northern-most spur of the Maurras range that I lost my way. It was not yet night, exactly, but it was far from broad daylight. The trail seemed to come to an end in a tangled clump of bushes, that looked like all the other underbrush on the solitary heath. Siegfried went courageously in, however, slipping about, but shrewdly feeling the ground with a forefoot before he rested his weight upon it. I relied mostly on his instinct to determine what was path and what was heather.

Unfortunately I had forgotten that at the northern tip of the ridge the Tourris trail makes off to the left from the route to the Grand Cap. I should have remembered this, I suppose; for the Tourris trail makes a well-known tramp from Toulon— up to the famous Col de la Mort de Gauthier. Strangely significant name!

My horse turned off on that trail, a fact of which I was not at once aware, because I had not even noticed the fork when we came to it.

If the path hitherto had been bad, it now became positively dangerous. The ground was rough, broken by boulders and ledges and with deep ravines and raincourses. We had left the rolling knolls about the basin of Valaury and were skirting the first rocky escarpments of the mountains. Siegfried went down on his knees a number of times.

Meanwhile long streamers of clouds kept reaching down from the ceiling of mist above us, a ceiling that was closer and closer to our heads as we reached the higher land. Eventually we found ourselves in a sort of transparent, almost luminous haze, which I knew was the forerunner of the bank of thick fog I had been watching as it drifted along some thirty feet above our heads.

"Provence always was a dirty hole!" I swore, as I well remember.

But at just this moment, the trail, if trail it could be called, took a sharp descent. Now we should have been going upgrade all along, and this sudden drop surprised me. Nothing of the kind had been indicated on my chart. I thought for a moment of consulting the map again, but the annoyance of unfolding the unwieldy paper and of studying in such wretched light all that maze of ditches and indentations deterred me. Besides, the drop soon came to an end and we were going uphill again, across a sort of hollow thickly overgrown with brush. The path was now a thing of the past decidedly. We were in a thicket of cat-briar which scratched Siegfried's belly and sides and cut my hands as I tried to keep the nettles off my own face. I could not get a good look at the ground, so thick was the undergrowth, but I observed that Siegfried was advancing with greater and greater reluctance. That much was evident. He did not like this going blindly into a territory where he scented danger.

Now there was another sharp drop followed by a third up-grade.

This convinced me that I was certainly off the road. I had been crossing a sort of saddle with three humps in a line. No such ground figured on the trail to the Grand Cap. I thought I would keep on, however, to the top of the next rise. From there, perhaps, I could get a look around.

And it turned out as I had hoped.

From the top of the grade ahead, I could see a broad plain shut in on all sides by mountains. These were lost in the distance; but even in that heavy weather their outlines were characteristic enough. This massive barrier to the West could be nothing but the Faron— the "Sleeping Dog" as it is sometimes called from its unusual contour. Over here was the Coudon, just as surely; there was no mistaking its eastern spur, sharp-pointed like the prow of a vessel cutting into the plain. Where was I then? There could be no doubt. I had made the summit of "Walter's Death" itself! So then, I must hurry back, and make as good time as possible! I must try to find the fork where I had gone astray and take the trail that went out to the

right from there. Time was an important matter. I might still have a half hour left before complete nightfall.

Siegfried was loath to plunge back into the maze of cat-briar from which we had just so painfully emerged. His nose had been scratched in a number of places. I pressed my knees into his sides to intimate that speed was a consideration. Pluckily he went back down the incline, and at the bottom, indeed, he broke into a trot.

And he trotted on—but not for long.

Just before we were reaching the second grade, I suddenly felt my saddle give way beneath me. I fell, and so did Siegfried. I remember the rough scratch of the brambles as I shot through them and the thud with which I struck on a stone. I lay stunned for the fraction of a minute; then I jumped to my feet, bleeding, bruised, torn, but unhurt, all in all. Not so with Siegfried! I knelt beside my poor, poor horse. His left forefoot had caught in a crevice between two stones, and his leg had snapped like a pipe-stem at the ankle. Never again would Siegfried take me on my morning gallop! Never would he leave that fatal gully into which he had gone so much against his will!

I wept.

We men of the cavalry think more of our horses than we do of our friends and of our sweethearts. I wept! But then, in a sort of reaction to cold brutality, I drew my revolver, pressed the muzzle into Siegfried's ear, closed my eyes, and fired. The noble body trembled for a brief second; then it lay limp and relaxed under that shroud of bush and cat-briar.

Coldly, mechanically, I returned my pistol to its place. Then I walked away, up toward the top of the hill, where I sat down on the first stone I came to.

A quarter of an hour must have passed before I came really to myself and thought of considering the plight in which I found myself.

It was not an enviable one! Here I was, on foot, well off any beaten trail, virtually lost in the most lonesome waste of the mountains of Provence. I had passed a deserted hut some four miles back on the road. The battery on the Cap must be fully seven or eight miles further on beyond the fork. And my duty it was to get there regardless of my helplessness in that impenetrable thicket, from which twilight was rapidly fading now, yielding to black night.

AGAIN I beg of you who read me.... Believe! Believe! Believe!

I was seated on a stone, to one side of what I took for the path. My eyes turned down toward the hollow from which I had just come—the place where the body of my horse was lying. Then I looked in the other direction, over toward the first hump of the double saddle of three hills. I was intending to rise and start out on my way again. It was my duty.... I was in honor bound to make the summit of the Grand Cap, find the battery, deliver my dispatch.

Suddenly, on the hill-top—the first one—it could not have been more than a hundred yards away, I perceived a human form, standing out in dark profile against the still livid sky. I say it was a human figure. It was that of a woman, and she was coming toward me at a rapid pace.

In joyous surprise I sprang to my feet. Certainly this was the last thing on earth I could have hoped for in such a place and at such an hour. Even in daytime it is rare to find a peasant, a wood-chopper, or a hunter in the neighborhood of the Mort de Gauthier! There are no trees worth cutting on those barren mountain sides. There are no fruits nor berries, nor even game. Yet here on this cold, rainy, foggy

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night I was meeting a woman—the only woman, as I was willing to bet, who had been along that trail in a month's time. Somebody from Valaury or Morière, probably, hurrying to get home by nightfall. She would be well acquainted with the region, doubtless, and would be only too glad to set me right about the trails.

I took two or three steps in her direction, observing, however, that she would pass right in front of me, in any case! How fast she was coming, too! How easily she managed all that rough uneven ground!

She was now twenty yards away. And I stopped in utter stupefaction!

She was not a peasant girl, by any means. That dress! It was of a fashionable cut, such as a society woman of distinction might wear. An afternoon otter cloak, edged with ermine, in the latest style; a large loosely hanging muff, of ermine also; a turban hat with plumes, the latter lying flat and pasted to the crown by the rain and mist. She had no umbrella and no heavier coat. There was nothing about her that seemed probable in that wilderness. I glanced in panic around me to be sure I was indeed in the foothills of those mountains and not in the winter-garden of some fashionable hotel on the Blue Coast; that it was the same desert in which I had lost my way, and that it was a cold, raw rainy night of December.

I could scarcely breathe now, and a cold chill began to run up and down my back.

Was it not an apparition?

Perhaps, but no ordinary apparition at any rate! Here was no impalpable, supernatural body. For I could hear the crunching of her feet on the leaves, a slight squeak in her shoes, and the silken rustle of her garments as they brushed against the brambles.

The woman came up to me, passed me, barely grazing my body. She was looking fixedly ahead, without stopping, without turning her eyes this way or that. I had first a front view of her features, then another in profile. I recognized her!

"Madeleine!"

The cry came from me involuntarily, a cry of terror absolute:

"Madeleine!"

The woman seemed not hear, just as she had seemed not to see. She walked rapidly past and away down the trail into the underbrush of the hollow.

MADELEINE, Madeleine de. . . .

But no. I must not write her name!

I had met her the year before—that would be year before last, the year of 1907. It was the month of May, I believe, but of that I cannot be sure. It seems so long, long ago, such a frightfully long, long, time ago! My memory is faltering like a waning candle flame flickering above its last drop of molten wax, sputtering with bursts of blue and yellow light as it is about to die out!

So then, the month of May, in the year 1907. . . . At this moment, a clearer flash of my memory comes—I see everything as vividly as I lived it then.

It was in the courtyard of the castle of LaGarde. I had strolled up the winding path to the ancient ruins; and behind the tower of the old donjon, I found . . . Madeleine sitting on the last step of the stairway leading up to the postern. She turned at the sound of my footsteps and she blushed. That blush told me I had intruded on a very personal, a very intimate, reverie. At our feet stretched the leprous plain and beyond the southern limit of the plain, the sea. A radiant sky, not a trace of vapor veiling the glare of the naked sun! The ugly plain caught fire from the rain of light, became beautiful for a moment. It was one of those golden days, when the chest can scarcely contain the exultant throbbing of a drunken heart!

When my eyes fell on the greenish golden hair of Madeleine, my heart began to throb, intoxicated. When her emerald eyes fell on me, my bosom heaved with an inner, ecstatic joy.

Later we knew that that instant had been the beginning of our love; for Madeleine confessed to me that a deep mysterious thrill had moved her also, at sight of my own enthralling emotion. . . . And the incredible horror of it all! That was not quite two years ago. And this hollow bag of crackling bones was I, I, a young, strong, hopeful man, loved and in love! Less than two years ago!

Sometime later: a *fiesta* at a sumptuous country house, looking down on the sea! Precipitous promontories, into which the maritime fir trees shot their roots and hung out horizontally above the foaming surf! Paths winding in and out among the trees—and lanterns, lanterns everywhere, shedding a soft and mellow light about the groves!

There I saw Madeline for the second time!

An evening gown of cloth-of-silver, cut low over splendid shoulders and my eyes lingered on them with longing!

We met by a balustrade hanging out over the sea. The subdued murmur of the breakers softened the echo of our voices. In the distance the wail of violins! Other couples walking to and fro on the path behind us! A man and woman came up to our terrace, broke the silence of our communion, went away again!

We talked of indifferent things—the small change of conversation, withholding words of deeper import. We sat there for a long time. One by one the lanterns burned themselves out. A red oval moon came up out of the sea, reached out along the water in the outline of a glistening, elongated cypress tree. The violins fell silent.

We walked back toward the villa.

Madeleine rested a cold hand on my arm. A sudden exaltation came over me. That woman whom I had so loved under the hot sunglow of an afternoon was now at my side. We were alone in that pine grove, alone under that moonlight! I threw an arm about her shoulders, drew her toward me, and pressed my lips to her lips in a kiss she did not avoid.

This was less than two years ago! It is hell to remember it now!

MADELEINE was a vivacious creature. Her graceful, subtle, intelligent beauty was not coarsened by the ruddy vitality of her features and the warmth evident in the Southern blood that raced through her blue veins. I must not linger on these impressions, however; they are of interest only to me. I am not writing a diary of my inner life! I am not writing my memoirs! This is a testament, in which I bequeath to the generations after me a Secret which it behooves all men and women, my brothers and sisters, to know.

It were better, perhaps, to abbreviate my story, suppress everything not pertinent to that Secret. But I must convince the skeptical. The voice of Truth must be felt in every word I say. I must show myself to be really the man I pretend to be: Charles André Narcy, captain of cavalry, Distinguished Service Cross, detailed to Staff Headquarters, born in Lyons, April 27th, 1876, died at Toulon, December 21, 1908 (or January 22, 1909). That I am this person I can prove only by this story. What desperation! Only by this story! I must convince you by the detailed fullness of my account. And in this sense, everything, everything, has a bearing on the Secret.

Now I must say that Madeleine was a beautiful, vivacious creature, plump with the healthy vigor of her Provençal race. And as I took her in my arms for the first time, I noted what a firm, solid, *heavy* person she was.

Later, when once I took her in my arms again and playfully lifted her from her feet, she seemed to me much *lighter*, much *lighter!*

Madeleine de X. . . . What horror! If only I could give her name! Then you would know! And she would confirm my story! However . . . honor impels me at this point to evade a little, to falsify a number of dates, and places, and details. You must get the meaning of what I say; but what does it matter if I write "June" instead of "October," or "Tamaris" instead of "Hyères," "taxicab" instead of "Peuchot." I must be careful, all the more because from moment to moment the flame of my memory is weakening, trembling, threatening to go out, reviving again only after minutes of anguish! The flame of my memory, and the flame of my intelligence, also! If I am not on my guard, some word, blighting to a lady's honor, may escape me!

She was the only daughter of a rich man! He was a hard, sour, ill-tempered fellow. During winter seasons he lived in a decrepit castle lost in the chalk dunes between Toulon and Aubagne. There he kept aloof from the world, receiving no visitors and making no calls himself. One of those domestic tragedies, as laughable in the eyes of society as they are torturing to the hearts they tear, had separated him from his wife some twelve or fifteen years before.

The old folks in Toulon, Nice, Marseilles, used to refer amusedly to the story, which they considered a most savory scandal. I never had an appetite for such things. I am unable to tell exactly why that man and that woman separated! I was never a friend of either of them. I saw him occasionally in the old days, at our officers' balls. His wife I used to meet from time to time at various resorts along the Riviera. She had a luxurious villa at La Turbie and another at Beaulieu. Part of the year she lived on her own properties; another part in Paris; usually she spent two or three months with Madeleine in Toulon, for there her daughter married and settled permanently.

In the summer months, Madeleine lived in a cottage of her own on Cépet Point, where the peninsula juts out into the roadstead and is always exposed to a cool breeze. Inspections often took me to the

batteries in that neighborhood, and I had occasion for many a delightful promenade in the groves and forests of Cépet and Sicie. I would ride up on horseback with an orderly, who came on the horse that Madeleine was to ride. We kept a side-saddle for her in the sentry box at one of the customs houses. . . . If you want details, there you have plenty of them. However. . . .

I have figured it out: It was in the month of May, of the year of 1907, that I met Madeleine for the first time at the old castle at La Garde; it was in the month of June of the same year that I encountered her for the second time at the *fiesta;* it was two or three weeks after that when I first took her in my arms and lifted her from her feet.

And, she was a heavy person, robust, solid, well-built, but *heavy, heavy!*

Some two months later, when we were playing on a beach, it occurred to me to take her in my arms and lift her again. I turned all my muscle to the task and prepared for the strain I so well remembered. To my surprise she was *light,* as *light* as a feather, strangely, surprisingly *light!* I carried her about in my arms without effort. And she had been such a heavy person!

THE dying flame of my memory burns up here into a brighter light. I remember the following with a strange, besetting vividness.

As Madeleine rose from the sand some straws and bits of earth clung to her skirt, and I brushed them off. Under the trees that bordered the shore, our horses were browsing at some leaves, and I still can hear the crumpling sound as they chewed them. To get back into the sadde, Madeleine rested a foot in my hand; and again I had that sensation of her extraordinary *lightness.* I looked up at her in some alarm.

As we rode along, I finally asked concernedly:

"My dear, have you been quite well these days past?"

She seemed surprised at the question:

"I?"

"Why yes, you! You seemed rather tired, I thought!"

She opened her handbag, produced a beautybox and looked into the tiny mirror that was on its cover. Then she laughed.

"What can you be dreaming of, silly! You quite frightened me! But my skin is as rosy as a milkmaid's!"

That was true. The exhilaration of the drive had brought the ruddiest glow to her cheeks. She brushed them over with her powder puff, however. I might well have accepted the explanation, but a feeling of uneasiness came over me. Might there not be strange diseases that eat out the vitality of a person without changing appearances of perfect health? Certain fevers bring rosiness and not pallor to the features!

I had not seen Madeleine for nearly a week just previous. She usually told me all she did. Perhaps she had been tiring herself in some way or other.

"What have you been doing, love, since I saw you Tuesday?"

"Since Tuesday?" she repeated with some hesitation.

"Ho!" said I. "What a memory! Yes, since Tuesday, to be sure!"

"Oh, yes! . . . It would be easier to remember if there were anything in particular," she replied. "I have done nothing at all, stupid! Oh yes, that's so! I did go into town once! That was Thursday!"

"And without telling me you were to be there, where I could have seen you?"

She turned toward me and stared, with a certain perplexity, as one looks on discovering in the mind a thought, or a memory, one had never dreamed of finding there. She repeated my exclamation with an interrogative inflection:

"Without letting you know?"

She looked dreamily down over the mane of her horse. Then she resumed.

"That's true I didn't let you know!"

And she blushed in the most evident perplexity and confusion. I was quite amused; and I went on:

"And I suppose you had a date with somebody . . . somebody whose company was far more alluring than that of your old friend perhaps! . . ."

She passed a hand across her forehead, as though to collect her thoughts; once, twice she did this. And I noticed that where her four fingers pressed upon her marble skin, four ruddy spots appeared.

"Did I see someone?" she asked. "Whom did I see?"

She asked the question quite innocently in a sort of dreamy reverie. I raised my voice in mock severity, the way one calls a child to order.

" 'Whom did I see!' How should I know, dearie, whom you saw? I was asking you!"

She started imperceptibly, and then quite changing tone and manner, she resumed·

"Oh, I made a mistake . . . Thursday! I didn't go into town, Thursday! It was Tuesday, and I took the train . . . for Beaulieu!"

"I see . . . so your mother is at Beaulieu again. You paid her a visit?"

"Nonsense! Mother is at Aix! This is September, you see!"

"Why Beaulieu, then?"

"Why Beaulieu?"

Again she seemed to have lapsed into a dream. As she answered, her lips quivered and each word came out with an effort that was noticeable.

"Because . . . why yes. . . . I had some errands to do there. . . . I went to Beaulieu. . . . In fact . . . see for yourself . . . !"

She dropped the reins and began looking through the little bag that was hanging from her wrist.

"See . . . here is my ticket . . . !" she added triumphantly.

I was quite puzzled, less at the fact of her visit to Beaulieu than at her whole manner. And my astonishment was not relieved when I observed that the ticket had been punched but once.

"You got on the train—that is evident! But how do you happen to have the ticket, anyway? How did you get through the gate without giving it up?"

Her eyes turned toward me vacantly, wide open, almost bulging.

"Why, I. . . . Yes. . . . How do I know? Of course not! I didn't give it up. I suppose the gateman failed to ask me for it. . . ."

And her brow knit into a slight wrinkle that seemed to mark a strange and intense mental concentration. A second later she seemed to give up, and she confessed:

"Listen, darling . . . I think I had better tell you. . . . It's all so absurd. . . . I'm really quite ashamed. But I think you ought to know. Well . . . see here . . . I simply don't know why I went to Beaulieu Tuesday. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, to call me there . . . at least, nothing that I can remember right now. . . . Nor can I remember having done anything in particular when I got there. . . . I left Tuesday morning and I came back Wednesday night. . . . And I was all tired out when I reached home. . . . There you have the whole story. . . ."

I WAS so astounded at this incredible tale that I pulled my horse up short.

"The whole story! That's absurd, my dear! You must have left word at home . . . given some pretext. . . . But your housekeeper . . . your maid . . . your husband . . . when you came home, they must have asked you about the villa or something!"

"Yes, my husband asked me if I had had a good trip and I answered that I had!"

"And the train . . . the journey itself . . . the station . . . Beaulieu! Where did you go, when you got out of the train?"

"To . . . to the villa . . . of course!"

"Of course nothing! You don't seem to be so sure!"

"Oh, I'm sure . . . sure enough! The trouble is, André . . . I don't know, it all seems so vague and hazy in my mind . . . and it's funny . . . the harder I try to remember, the less I seem able to. . . . Oh, I'm ill, ill, André! Here . . . here!"

And one of her pink fingers pointed to the vertical wrinklet between her eyebrows. As I sat there looking at her fixedly, searchingly, she burst suddenly into convulsive sobs. I reined my horse to her side, put my arm about her shoulders, and kissed her tears away.

For I loved the girl!

I make that confession here again, absurd, ridiculous, grimly ironical though the declaration may seem.

I loved her. This I must say so that all of you . . . men and women . . . will understand, and believe!

I loved her. Notice: I met her on a sunny afternoon in May; and again on a moonlight night in June; and I found her beautiful; and I told her so. . . . To you cynics it may seem strange, incredible, to call that love! I can see you smiling!

But—all of you—look around among your memories, try to remember! You have all met your sweethearts for the first time at some time or other. Before that, you were not in love. You began with simple curiosity; and your first kiss was a kiss of playfulness—"Once will do no harm!" And perhaps often it was the first and the last kiss.

But more often the first kiss gave you a longing for the second. The flirtation became love and that love devotion. "Once!" "Again!" "And again!" And, finally, "Forever!" "For all our lives!"

Oh, yes, I know, I know! It was all a dream, and people cannot dream forever. The flesh is weak, and the spirit less enduring than the flesh. You wearied of each other. Forever became a year, six months, six weeks! Love, indifference, infidelity, estrangement, oblivion! Oh, yes, I know, I know! But what of that? It was honestly that you loved each other! In good faith you swore: "I must have you

with me forever!" In good faith you promised to love each other and cherish each other and cleave unto each other! And truly would you have laid down your lives that your sweethearts might never die. . . .

Smile then, if you wish, when I say that I loved her!

SO THEN, it was twilight, just after sunset on a raw, foggy, rainy day, the 21st of December, 1908—my last day of life. And around me was the hill of the strangely significant name: *Le col de la Mort de Gauthier!* A cry of terror had escaped me:

"Madeleine!"

It was she—Madeleine, the girl I loved, alone, afoot, on that deserted heath, on that raw, foggy rainy, wintry evening—Madeleine, hurrying along that solitary trail through the sweet-fern and the cat-briar, in her afternoon costume, as she would dress for a tea at a fashionable hotel . . . and twenty miles from home!

"Madeleine!" I called. And she seemed not to hear me, and not to see me; but hurried on, on, on, rapidly, with unerring step, over that rough and broken and rain-soaked ground.

My heart stopped beating. For ten, fifteen, twenty seconds I stood there paralyzed, rooted to the trail. Then I came to myself; and in a mad dash down the incline, I went off in pursuit of her.

Ahead of me I could see her figure already ascending the slope of the third knoll. She moved easily, rapidly, experiencing no difficulty from the matted underbrush and cat-briar. She was following the trail. But at the top of the hill she turned—to the eastward, with her back to Toulon, that is. There a thick curtain of night seemed to have fallen before the taller underbrush. I saw her skirt as it vanished across the line of darkness into shrubbery that reached above her head. A second later I caught a glimpse of her ermine collar farther in, and then once more and then for a third time.

I was running with all the headlong speed I could muster. My foot caught in a snarl of cat-briar. I plunged forward, scraping across a flat stone. But I barely touched the ground. I was on my feet in an instant. "Madeleine! Madeleine!" I called.

I thought I caught sight of her ermine collar again as she hurried across a clearing. Then she was gone. The wet moss was thin above the solid ledging of the knoll. It slipped under my feet, on the brink of a ditch such as that which had cost Siegfried his life. I fell a second time. Again I was on my feet. And now, against the sky over the hill-top ahead of me, profiled on the leaden but much darker clouds, I saw the same mysterious figure I had seen at first—save that now it was of hazier, more indistinct outline.

"Madeleine! Madeleine!" I shouted desperately. And I dashed on.

Step by step the figure sank behind the crest of the hill. When I reached the place, I found one of her footprints in the mud on the edge of a stone. But she had disappeared completely. The soft moss preserved no record of her passage. Before me lay the silent, deserted slope of the Col de la Mort de Gauthier; to the right the escarpments of the Maurras range; to my left the approaches to the Grand Cap. And no signs of any human being!

In anguished desperation I tore out into the underbrush, on which night had definitely fallen. I was determined to overtake the fugitive, get to the bottom of this prodigious mystery. I ran and ran, all my heart bent on finding the slightest trace of her . . . all my heart and all my bewildered mind. I mounted great boulders with one bound, and was over them in another. I went forward springing from rock to rock, falling at times, turning my ankles, forcing thickets of briars by sheer weight of impact, tearing my clothes, scratching my face and hands, but running, running, running. I thought I saw a light off to the left. I turned in that direction and again ran on. I must have spent hours in this fruitless, aimless, despairing search. I remember that finally I sank to the ground, breathless, exhausted, utterly unable to move. I don't know where I fell. I know simply that I lay there, insensible, corpse-like, dead; and, as happens when one had gone beyond his physical and spiritual resources, a deep, dreamless, annihilating sleep came over me.

CHAPTER II

HOW long I had been sleeping there I do not know. But suddenly a curious, though well-known sensation drew me from my slumber—the sense of a strange presence near me, and of a gaze fixed upon me. I was lying on one side, with my forehead resting on my bent arm. Evidently then I could not see; but the emanation of that presence and the weight of that gaze impressed me at one and the same time, as a veritable blow striking me on the back of the head.

The experience was not new to me. Often in a sound sleep have I thus divined the approach of a living being—though never with such intensity as this. I had the consciousness that the person who was thus powerfully exerting his influence upon me could be like no other human being I had ever seen. And I, who at that time—how unutterably distant in the past it seems!—was a young, a vigorous, a courageous man, instead of sitting up at once, and facing my visitant, lay there as I was, for some moments, with my forehead resting on my arm, pretending not to be awake, and listening, listening.

Through my half-opened eyelids, I could see perhaps a square foot of earth and moss in the area encircled by my arm. That earth and that moss were lighted by a pale, trembling, yellowish glow. I understood that someone was waving a light above my head.

At last I did sit up and with a start, as though I had just awakened. And I rose to my feet, drawing back a step in bewilderment.

A man was standing before me, a very, very aged man; as I remarked from the long, broad, glistening, snow-white beard that covered his chest and abdomen. That much I could see in spite of the glare from a dark lantern which he was holding with the spotlight up-turned into my face. However, his voice had no huskiness when he addressed me. It was deep and solemn, but without a sign of trembling or of faintness—on the contrary, it seemed resonant with virility and vigor. I was somewhat taken back, besides, with the curt abruptness with which he questioned me.

"What are you doing here, Monsieur?"

That was not the greeting I had been expecting; and in view of the obvious plight I was in, I found it quite discourteous. But the man was at least three times my age, I judged, and I answered as politely as I could.

"As you see, Sir, I am off the road and quite lost, I fear."

He kept the spotlight playing on my features, and I observed that his two piercing, extraordinarily luminous eyes were studying me critically.

"Lost, eh? And here! How did you get here, Sir? And where were you going?"

I was now frankly irritated at these irrelevancies; so much so, indeed, that I failed to note the incongruity of such formal and correct language in the mouth of what must apparently have been a charcoal-burner of the mountains.

Drily I exclaimed:

"I came from Toulon by way of Solliès-Pont headed for the battery on the Grand Cap. I missed the trail somewhere near the Col de la Mort de Gauthier. There my horse fell and broke his leg; and I got lost trying to reach the paths up the Cap, cross-country."

This version of my experiences seemed moderately to satisfy the old man. He took the light away from my eyes and swept the bushes and rocks about us with it. It was, in truth, an appallingly wild locality. In my mad race through the darkness I had reached a jumbled region of rocks and ravines where my presence might well astonish anybody. But I had just as good right to wonder. How should he happen to be there, too?

"And you, Sir, what were you doing away off here?"

He shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the top of an escarpment that towered on my left.

"I saw you from up there!" he said.

And he fell silent, as did I.

No longer pestered with the glare in my eyes, I could examine my strange companion at more advantage. He was an old man, no doubt of that, an extremely old man, as his snow-white beard, his wrinkled, withered skin, his lean, tenuous hands attested. But he was a marvelously robust and wiry old fellow. There was no droop to his shoulders. He held his head erect. His arms were well knit at the joints and he seemed lithe and agile on his legs. In view of his whole bearing, which suggested strength, energy, initiative, I gathered that the cane on which he was leaning he carried not for support but as a weapon.

I, a soldier in my early thirties, felt helpless in the presence of that powerful octogenarian. Instinctively my hand went to the automatic in my hip-pocket, where only one of the eight bullets was dead—the one that had put poor Siegfried out of his agony. However, I felt ashamed, almost at once, of such stupid and unreasonable fear of the man. I again addressed him, and this time with a deferential and somewhat effusive politeness.

"I have not thanked you, Sir, as yet. Do, please, excuse such rudeness. I appreciate your generous kindness in going to so much trouble in my behalf. I am sure you have saved my life by coming to my rescue down that perilous cliff. Please accept my deepest thanks. I am Captain André Narcy, of the staff of Vice-Admiral de Fierce . . . !"

I stopped, expecting that a name would

be volunteered in exchange for mine. But the old man did not introduce himself, though he did listen to what I was saying with the closest attention. I began again:

"I was, I am, the bearer of a dispatch to the corporal on guard at the Grand Cap battery. It was in an effort to execute that mission, unfortunately still unperformed, that I lost my way, wandered aimlessly about for a time, and finally lay down here to sleep when I was quite all in. And now, Sir, might I impose upon your kindness further? Could you not direct me to the Grand Cap trail, the good one, the one I was looking for and could not manage to find myself?"

MEANWHILE I was studying the old man carefully. There was nothing unusual about his dress. His clothes were, to a button approximately, those one might expect to find in such weather on a shepherd, a hunter, a woodchopper of those mountain regions; heavy hobnailed shoes and thick leggings, corduroy trousers and coat, a plain flannel shirt. But it was just at this point that the contrast between his costume and the cultivated intonation of his language first impressed me. The observation caused me another thrill of fear. In my confusion I caught his reply but indistinctly.

"The good road, Monsieur? In truth, you are on the bad road, the worst road, I might even say!"

I suppressed my uneasiness as best I could.

"Where am I, exactly? Am I far from the battery?"

"Very, very far!"

"Well, but . . . what do you call this place?"

"I doubt if it has a name! At any rate, you will not find it on your chart!"

"Oh, you must be joking. I can't be so very far off the road! I must be somewhere between the Mort de Gauthier and the Grand Cap! Call it eight miles to the fort . . . and you will be putting it high!"

The fist that was clenched about the cane rose and fell in a gesture of ironic helplessness:

"Well, call it eight miles, Monsieur. How could you do eight miles in a dark like this?"

Again he swept the spotlight around that chaotic devil's dump of boulders. To tell the truth, I cringed with involuntary terror, though I did manage to pull myself together again.

"Do them I must, in any event. The dispatch of which I have the honor to be bearer is of the first importance. You will be so kind, Sir, as to suggest the direction of the battery—and I will be infinitely obliged."

The point of the cane swung upward from the ground toward the steepest of the precipices, the upper brink of which projected out into the chasm in a menacing overhang.

"It's off in that direction," said the old man.

I bowed with some ceremony, determined to waste no further time.

"Thank you, and good night, Sir!"

Resolutely I advanced to the foot of the cliff, and climbed up to the first indentation in the virtually perpendicular wall. But a sullen rage came over me as I realized the impossibility of making the ascent.

"Off in this direction, eh? But there are night hawks that seem to get around all right—and with precious little loss of time!"

I grumbled the words between my clenched teeth, addressing them to my own angry self alone. The man was fully fifty feet away and could not possibly have heard. Yet I suddenly felt the same pressure on the back of my head and between my shoulders which had been the cause of my awakening. The man was looking at me! That impact was the shock from his piercing eyes! I turned sharply about, almost expecting an attack from him.

But he was standing just where I had left him, his eyes fixed upon me with an expression in no sense hostile. Rather I seemed to catch a smile of kindliness playing about his withered, wrinkly features. When he now spoke, the same note of kindly benevolence was sensible in his voice, and the abruptness noticeable in his first questions had also softened measurably.

"Monsieur," said he, "I was loath to venture a suggestion which you had failed to invite and which, doubtless, you would be quite unwilling to accept. Nevertheless . . . I should be grievously at fault, were I to let you run to certain death. I will give you an hour to break a leg, or an arm, or your neck, in tumbling into one of these gorges. Suppose you lay with a fractured skull at the foot of a wall of rock—your message would not be delivered any the sooner, would it? Don't be impatient! Wait till daylight comes! And an early morning start will bring you to the fort and, perhaps, in time. Try to get there

now and your dispatch, I assure you, will never reach its destination!"

He stood there thinking for a moment and then he concluded pensively: "A mountaineer as experienced as I am might possibly venture such a thing. But at night, over rock that is forever breaking off under your feet . . . !"

I don't know why, at just that moment, my thoughts reverted to the other encounter I had had a few hours earlier in that self-same neighborhood. I closed my eyes to reconstruct in my mind the image of Madeleine, deaf, mute, unconscious apparently, running that heath like a somnambulist.... And for the third time, but on this occassion full in the face, I felt the impact of the fluid energy which seemed to spurt from the eyes that were fixed upon me.

When I looked up again, the same uncontrollable terror was in possession of me: the man was in truth gazing at me—and that was all. An extravagant suspicion flitted across my mind: that man, that curious old man—could he be listening to the sound of my thoughts, as I could hear the sound of his words?

At last he seemed willing to come to the point.

"Consider, Monsieur! I live not far from here! Would you not accept my hospitality until dawn? The rain is beginning again. It will be wet and cold on the mountains, and it is hardly midnight."

I looked around in astonishment into the wall of darkness about us. He lived near-by? A house, in that solitude?

He understood my perplexity.

"Quite so!" he said, answering my unexpressed thought. "Quite so! Just a step or two! This way, Monsieur, if you please!"

His voice had now a soft, caressing gentleness; though I sensed an imperious order in his words—a command I could only obey.

When he turned to go, I followed him.

EASILY, lightly, rapidly, over the jumbled rocks and through the tangled underbrush, the hoary old man made his way, beating his cane to right and left to open a path before us. I kept carefully to his foot-prints, really exerting myself, however, to maintain his rate of progress.

Fully a quarter of an hour it must have been that we walked thus in file one behind the other. Then my guide stopped of a sudden, turned toward me, and said:

"Monsieur, you will be careful!"

His cane pointed to some obstacle, or to some danger, just to my right. Cautiously I stepped nearer, and a creeping chill ran over me: we were on the brink of a precipice, its edges so thoroughly masked with fern that a step six inches off the path would have hurled me into a void. I could not have guessed the nearness of such peril. Feeling the ground in front of me with my toe, I leaned over and peered down into the abyss. Along its bottom a mountain torrent ran, black water rushing over polished white stones. The sheer face of the gorge offered not a projection to foot or hand.

"Keep well to the left, Monsieur," said the old man; and he strode on.

The ground now took on a strange contour previously known to me. The ditched, pock-marked, crevassed soil of the Mort de Gauthier where my horse was lying, and the maze of gorges through which I had pursued Madeleine, came to an end. We were now on a gently sloping table-land broken in all directions by curious blocks of stone. The soil was overgrown with brambles, juniper, and numerous other spiny shrubs. The rocks sprang naked from the earth in abrupt faces cut apparently to geometrical design, triangles, squares, polygons, as though fashioned with human tools. On the one hand, none of their surfaces was sufficiently smooth to warrant the assumption of deliberate working; on the other there was too little irregularity in their structure and disposition to allay wonder at such a strange caprice of Nature. As a whole, indeed, they formed a veritable labyrinth, through which it would have been difficult to pick one's way even in broad daylight. The old man went indifferently onward, nevertheless, not hesitating in the least, and finding his path without effort through this entanglement of scattered boulders.

Again the topography changed. The monoliths became fewer in number; the plateau had a perceptible down grade. The junipers, myrtles and mastics grew stunted and less crowded, and the land was otherwise quite barren.

If I describe this walk of ours in such detail, I do so in the hope that some of you may be tempted to seek out in the neighborhood of my misfortune, the house of which I am to speak. Its exact location I cannot recall. I could not find it again for the life of me; nor could I really identify it among other houses you might show me. It is, nevertheless, the House of the Secret, though all I can say of it is that, at last, we came to it.

In the opaque wall of darkness ahead of us a tall black mass stood out against the paler black of the night around it. First came a hedge of tall cypress trees, the boundary of a private park, a hedge like the thousands of other hedges one may find about the country villas of Provence—the Provence that frizzles in summer sun.

In the hedge was an iron gate, between the bars of which the old man slipped a hand and turned some secret lock. The gate swung open. My feet began to tread on a soft, thick sod, unmown. Brushing my head I could feel low-hanging branches of cedars, pines and corktrees. Finally through the inky black of the grove the brickstone front of a house came into view. It was so dark under the matted interlacing of branches along the walk, that I could not isolate a single distinctive feature on the façade before me, except perhaps the stone stairway up which I went to a door. There were just eight steps. I remember because I counted them. One other detail: from the roof, and on my left as I went in, an indistinct but tall, slender mass seemed to rise, a sort of tower, or belfry. . . . Mark this item carefully. . . . It may help you!

The door was of heavy oak, studded with iron nails. The knocker was a hammer and an anvil, the latter with two points and set deep into the thick panelling.

As he raised the hammer, my companion turned to me, his eyes gleaming with an eagerness I did not like. But his voice, soft, calm, caressing, benevolent, once more relieved my fear, once more constrained me to resist an impulse to stand on my guard like an animal at bay!

"Monsieur," he said, "I am sure you will forgive me for a slight advertence: my father, who is about to open the door, is a very old man, and his sleep must be respected; you will be good enough to make as little noise inside as possible!"

The metallic beat of the hammer upon the anvil strangely mingled in my ears with the words I had just heard. It was something like an echo of the stupor, which, at these strange phrases, struck me like a blow. So this old fellow had a father, whom he referred to as an old man! If he was eighty, more or less, how old would this parent be?

Again the hammer fell upon the anvil in a double rapid stroke like the ritualistic stamp of the fencer's foot as the duel begins. And this double stroke was followed by another, a single one, like the first.

The door swung open.

THE anteroom that now came into view was a spacious one, dimly lighted by two candles. I could make out a series of frescos on the four walls above the paneling, which was of some dark, almost black wood, oak or walnut, I should say. Except for the heads of two stags with antlers, there were no ornamental furnishings. The doors, in some ancient style, were so fashioned as to blend, when closed, with the sheathing.

But one detail I did see with absolute distinctness the moment I crossed the threshold. Standing in front of me, with his left hand still on the latch which it had just opened, was an old man so like in every particular to my guide that I turned, despite myself, to be sure it was really a case of two different individuals and not of one with an image reflected in a mirror. They had the same long, wide, flowing snow-white beards; the same serious, motionless, mysterious eyes. Yes, I turned and stared. Such complete identity was beyond belief. But yet, they were really two men—father and son—the son bowing with deference to the father.

In fact, this demeanor on the part of the person who had come through the heath with me was the means, henceforth, by which I managed to distinguish the younger from the older man; though both, to the eye, seemed equally full of years, not to say centuries, ages; both equally robust, withal, equally erect of carriage, equally muscular with the litheness of youth.

I had stopped instinctively, eventually mustering presence of mind enough to bow deeply to mine host, a greeting which he returned politely but without pronouncing a word. His eyes, meanwhile, were surveying me with the most searching fixity. After a time they turned for the fraction of a second upon my escort, and I understood that they carried a question, imperiously.

"I took upon myself, Sir, the responsibility of bringing this gentleman here. I found him lying out in the rain in the hapless state you see him in. He had gone astray among the boulders at the outer end of the labyrinth."

These sentences were uttered in a half-whisper, as though the speaker were afraid of disturbing a household at slumber.

The father did not answer for a space of time which I found a markedly long one. Then he said:

"Your conduct was quite proper, I believe, Sir."

And he too spoke in a half-whisper.

These "Sirs" between father and son as-

tonished me with their savor of antique formality; and I was impelled thereby to glance at the costume of this hoary gentleman who was thus addressing his offspring with the ceremonious formulas of bygone feudal days. Nothing in particular! A rustic outfit in corduroy, exactly like that of the "boy;" except that the elder man wore old-fashioned knee-breeches with woolen stockings and buckles at the knees.

The son was meantime recounting my story to his parent with a fullness that neglected no detail.

"Monsieur, is an officer," said he. "His name is Narcy, Captain André Narcy. He is the bearer of a sealed dispatch, a very urgent one, so it seems, must be delivered at the earliest possible moment. That is why I judged it best to offer our hospitality to monsieur for the night: he must have a good rest to be in condition for a hurried journey tomorrow morning, when daylight will permit him to make the ascent without such a distant wandering from his path as he fell into—for lack of a guiding hand—tonight. For, without any doubt whatever, monsieur met not a living soul along the trail to set him on the right road. And that, without any doubt whatever, is the reason why monsieur strayed so very, very far from this Grand Cap where he was going."

The innuendos in this narrative did not fail to impress me. I scanned the faces of the two men, one after the other, anxiously; but neither carried the slightest expression. The father answered also in a tone that was entirely normal, repeating word for word his earlier sentence of approval:

"Your conduct was quite proper, I believe, Sir."

I groped about in my mind for an appropriate phrase of thanks; but before I hit upon one, mine host, pointing a finger at one of the invisible doors in the paneling, remarked, still addressing his son:

"It is evident that monsieur should be allowed to retire at once. Be so good as to show him to his room, Sir! You will need a light."

I bowed in acknowledgement, without speaking. The son was already in motion, leading the way with the same spotlight playing on the room about us. Our first steps on the tiled floor raised a curious echo in that all but unfurnished chamber, the four walls of which threw each sound back upon us and seemed to prolong it with a briefly sustained tremor. The spotlight chanced to cast a round, luminous circle upon one of the frescos. As far as my hasty glimpse of it enabled me to judge, it was a mythological subject in faded color and not over-stressed design—a birth of Aphrodite from the sea, perhaps.

My guide drew back, in succession, three long thick bolts, longer and thicker than any bolts I could remember ever having seen. They secured the door to which the elder of the two men had pointed. A closer view of the wall revealed to me that beside this door there was another, similarly disguised in the paneling and fastened in the same way. Taken together, they might have been mistaken for the two wings of one folding door, joining very badly, for that matter, despite their rugged hinges; for a gap of a full inch was visible under each of the presumed wings.

These observations had scarcely flashed through my mind, when the old man, the father, that is, who had been standing in the center of the reception hall with his eyes glued upon me, advanced suddenly in my direction, and his steps, light as they were, echoed about the room as ours had done. I stopped and looked at him. With a gesture, and speaking to me directly for the first time, he said:

"Monsieur, I forgot to remind you that in our house, and not far indeed from the quarters you will occupy, we have a case of sickness. Might I request you, therefore, kindly to make as little noise as possible?"

This was the second time I had been urged not to talk; but the pretext had been different on each occasion. . . .

And then something happened . . . a very inconsiderable thing, which gave me a distinct shiver of excitement. It was not so much myself who trembled, but rather that submerged, unconscious being we each have within us which watches while we slumber and ever has a memory and a consciousness quite apart from our waking selves. . . .

From under the other door—the door which had not been opened, namely—a sudden draught of warm air came. It was cold, noticeably cold, in the reception hall; but behind the closed door was a room which they kept much better heated. Now that draught of warm air! . . . As it passed through my nostrils, I became gradually aware of its fragrance. It was sweet with a perfume which my conscious self did not recognize, but which my submerged ego at once remembered—my submerged ego only, indeed. That is why I had crossed the threshold of the open door before I really understood. . .

Before I really understood, that is, what the closed door concealed. . . .

BEYOND the door that was open stretched a passageway, and at the end of the passageway came another door. Once we were through the latter, the spotlight of my escort fell upon a flight of stairs, six steps high, as I counted. I noted also that the treads were of the same red square tiles as the floor of the reception hall. Only the nosings were of wood, a wood much worn from long service. At the top of the steps my guide opened one last door.

I now found myself in a very dark room, so dark, indeed, that I paused just inside the threshold from fear of colliding with some piece of furniture. The man, however, drew aside the top of his lantern and from the flame within it began to light the three wicks of a massive iron candlestick, a sort of tripod fashioned to represent three lances supporting one another.

The room brightened. I noted that it contained this candelabrum, one chair, and one bed, the latter simple, home-made articles such as a peasant might improvise for himself.

"And I wish you a good night, Monsieur," said my guide, with a bow. "Please sleep quite at your ease. I shall have the honor of waking you in time, myself."

"At sunrise?" said I.

"At sunrise," he answered, "or perhaps . . . perhaps a moment or two before sunrise. . . ."

That seemed to me a very natural thing to say.

I returned his courtesy.

"Good night, Monsieur!"

He went away. I listened to his footsteps as they clacked on the tiles of the six steps, and then on the pavement of the passage. Finally I heard the door into the anteroom swing to, and, less to my surprise than to my alarm, the great iron bolts slide back into their places. The grating sound they made, however slight, was quite audible in the absolute silence of the mansion.

I sat down on the wicker chair at the foot of the plain pine bedstead.

In sitting down I had intended to collect my thoughts if possible, bring a little order into the chaos of impressions, suspicions and fears that were whirling in my bewildered brain. But I had hardly touched the seat when an unexpected sensation put an end to my reflections.

I had cast my eyes about the four walls of the room where I now was—four walls cheaply papered in a stock design of loud colors. Again the miserable poverty of the furnishings had impressed me, with the exception of the antique candlestick. The place, indeed, in its present condition, had all the appearances of a spare room, roughly fitted up with these few odd and ill-matched articles. I would not have thought it strange had I detected there the close musty odor that one always meets in apartments long unoccupied and rarely aired.

But that was not the smell that came to my nostrils. Quite the contrary in fact! The room was suddenly fragrant with a warm living perfume, a perfume that now reminded me of the one I had vaguely perceived in the draught from under the closed door of the anteroom. It was not the same perfume, by any means, though it was of the same general kind, one of those essences which float about every house where women are, combining the most diverse aromas into a single fragrance that is the alluring fragrance of feminine beauty.

I brought all my senses to bear upon it. "Heliotrope," I analyzed . . . "and rose!" The isolation of these two essences seemed all at once to sharpen my memory of the earlier perfume; the latter, unmistakably, had been a lily of the valley.

"Muguet," I said aloud, "lily of the valley!"

All a-quiver I leapt to my feet, terrified, stunned, but ferociously determined. Of course! Of course! The two syllables of that French word, *muguet,* had brought a flood of light into my clouded mind. Of course! *Muguet!* Her perfume! Madeleine! Madeleine!

It is curious that in the overwhelming anguish that had now seized upon me, an insignificant thought came to the surface of my seething consciousness and restored all the coolness and self-control that I had lost. "What an unconscionable ass I have been! Fool! Fool! Fool! Of course! Of course! Why did I not get the point at the very first? Long ago, long ago? After the very first suspicious words I heard from the mouths of those two weird hosts of mine? . . . Fool of fools! Why did I not recognize her perfume out there in the hall where I first perceived it—before those three bolts were drawn upon me, leaving me a helpless prisoner in this hole where I am caught like a rat in a trap?

"Helpless, eh? Like a rat in a trap, eh? Not quite."

I was almost normally calm as I put a

hand to my belt and drew my revolver. Helpless, eh? There were eight cartridges in my automatic, and I had used only one —the one that put poor Siegfried out of his misery! "Seven left! Helpless? Not so helpless as all that? There must be seven of them!"

I snapped the lock on the hammer and opened the magazine. The seven bullets were in place. I threw the barrel back into position and released the lock again, testing the trigger lightly with my finger to be sure the requisite free play was there. I put the pistol into my coat pocket, with my right hand upon it.

"At sunrise, eh? You were coming back at sunrise, old Methuselah? Do! I shall be glad to see you!"

I rose from the chair and stepped over to the bed. The sheets were singularly delicate, the coverlets thick and downy. Another breath of perfume floated past my nostrils—I buried a fist in my hot, feverish cheek. . . . That bed, so daintily prepared! It had been offered to me! But for whom had it been made so cosy? Who slept there ordinarily? And my thoughts flashed out through the walls and partitions of that accursed mansion to another room, where there would be another bed and in it a woman, sleeping! Madeleine, my Madeleine!

The dart of horrified jealousy that ran through my heart was like the thrust of a sharp, white-hot sword.

Madeleine! There, in that other chamber, at night! The victim of what unconscionable sorcery!

The three candles were flickering at the three points of their tripod of lances. The door!

I looked at it. Here also the joinings yawned from age. And that would doubtless be the case with the window.

For there was a window in the room.

I stepped over to examine it, pressing my forehead to the panes and plunging my gaze into the outer blanket of darkness.

Nothing! Nothing at all. An impenetrable pall of inky blackness came right up against my eyes. A thick growth of ivy formed an outer curtain over the window, weaving a fabric through and around the heavy iron bars which guarded it.

A prison! That was the very name for it!

I heard footsteps moving softly along one of the partitions behind me. I held my breath. Soon silence returned, complete death-like silence.

I went back to the bed and lay down upon it, waiting, ready for anything. I had my clothes and my boots on. My hand clutched the butt of the automatic in my pocket.

LITTLE by little my brain had regained its lucidity and my heart its normal beat. Now, outstretched on the bed, with my boots and clothes on, and my hand upon my pistol, I was waiting, waiting. I noted the fact: the hand upon my pistol had not a tremor: it was ready to kill. My Adventure was approaching its denouement. I would soon have to fight a battle, where I must needs come off victorious.

These considerations were like a potent cordial to my overstrained nerves. So cool and collected indeed had I become that I was now prepared to take everything as a matter of course. I could, that is, restrain my astonishment, or at least postpone any expression of it. Madeleine, in that mysterious house, at that time of night! No, there was no explaining it, with any explanation at all convincing. But, for the moment, no explanation was necessary, or in point. We would come to that later—after the combat—which must end in my victory. Meantime, all conjecture would be superfluous.

The three candles were still burning on their tripod of the three crossed lances. But they were getting short. I took out my watch and looked at it. Half past two! The candles would almost certainly fail to outlast the night. And to shoot accurately you must see, clearly see, your target! I rose from the bed, walked over to the candlestick and put out two of the three wicks burning. Then I went back to my bed again.

But I had my boots on. My spurs had scraped noisily on the tiling of the floor; and, since the latter had no carpet, my heels had clacked loudly as I walked. And that was not the worst of it. As my weight came down upon the edge of the bed, the spring gave a long, piercing, metallic squeak, which, in case anyone at all were guarding me, had a fine chance of being heard, in that sepulchral silence reigning, two of three partitions away. This reflection had had just time to settle clearly in my mind, when, and almost as an echo to

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the creaking of the spring, the lock in the door of my room creaked in turn.

With a bound I was off the bed; and I had to restrain myself in order not to level my automatic upon the door and let fly the moment it opened.

I managed to control that impulse. Besides there came a knock, a discreet, a courteous knock, on the panel. The door swung open slowly, and in the doorway I saw one of my hosts, I could not decide whether the father or the son, but at any rate one of the two old men with the long, broad, glistening, snow-white beards. He was standing there quite motionless, not presuming to come in. His eyes, in truth, had swept me with a glance from head to foot; and there I was, with my clothes and my boots on, in the unmistakable posture of a man who had not been in bed at all, who had resisted slumber, and kept on watch, nervous, suspicious, mistrustful, ready for any emergency that might arise.

I caught a rapid flash in those scrutinizing eyes, a lightning-like flare that vanished on the instant. And again a thought that I had had before flitted across my straining consciousness: those penetrating eyes—did they not have, perchance, the power of going deeper than my forehead, piercing through to the secret thoughts harbored naked in my brain?

And then the old man spoke.

"Monsieur has not been sleeping. Truly, we suspected as much. In view of that, why should monsieur pass such a dull time alone here in this chamber? Would monsieur not like to join us in the room below? I think that would be far better—for monsieur, as well as for us."

I had regained my composure once more; and I answered with decision:

"I will accept your invitation, Sir!"

And I advanced upon him.

But he drew back as though to let me pass in front of him. This I refused to do. He may have guessed what was in my mind, for he did not insist. He led the way in front of me, with the words:

"As you will, Monsieur . . . just to show you the way! . . ."

ON REACHING the reception hall, I stopped in front of the door where I had caught the breath of Madeleine's perfume. But it was not toward it—not as yet toward it—that I was guided.

In fact, the old man went straight across the anteroom, and, seeing me motionless in front of the same door, politely called:

"This way, if Monsieur will be so kind!"

Another door, concealed as all the others in the paneling, now opened, not, however, into a corridor, but directly into a large, in fact, a very, very large room, which was thus cut off from the reception hall by the thickness of one partition.

My eyes winced before the glare of some fifty or sixty candles distributed about the room in holders along the walls and of two massive lamps, one to either side of the fire-place. The latter was a majestic hearth in ancient style with a huge embossed and sculptured hood spacious enough, I thought, to accommodate a goodly number of whole oxen.

Seated in an armchair and facing me as I came in was the old father—so at least I decided; but next to him, now, was a third aged man whom I had not seen as yet, and whom I took for a much younger person than the other two, though he also was far from young. They both bowed in greeting as I entered.

I stopped near enough to the door to prevent its being closed. The man to whom I had not been introduced motioned toward an empty chair. I declined it with a shake of my head; whereupon he rose.

"As you will," said he. "I understand your feeling!"

His voice was in a very queer falsetto.

I saw him push his chair back and come forward a step in my direction. His two aged companions took up positions to the right and left of him, as though he were their chief. Chief indeed he proved to be.

There was a moment's silence: then this man resumed:

"Monsieur le capitaine, I must offer you my apologies. It may seem inconsiderate of me to have disturbed you in your slumbers. But it may be you were not having a very quiet repose. In that case I may count on your forgiveness! . . ."

He broke off, and pointed with a gesture first to the one and then to the other of his two companions.

"And pray forgive them, too," he added. "They are well-meaning boys, on the whole, though their manners leave something to be desired. In this they are entitled to be excused, perhaps, in view of the place and times we are living in and our aloofness from most men of the world. Certainly it would be difficult to explain away all their breaches of good form to a stickler on the niceties of conduct or to some one of over-delicate susceptibilities. But such, fortunately, you prove not to be, and I must congratulate you on your forbearance. Nevertheless, I cannot overlook the first

I became the centre of a cyclonic whirl and an overpowering dizziness assailed me!

and grossest of the impertinences inflicted on you.

"When you were so kind as to volunteer your name, this young man here neglected to give his name to you. I have reproved him severely for this oversight, and I solicit your indulgence in his behalf. He is the Vicomte Antoine, at your service, Sir; and here is Count François, his father, if you please. And I—you will pardon me—am the Marquis Gaspard, father of Count François and grandfather to Vicomte Antoine. There you have us all; and now, I trust, you will not impose upon me the hardship of remaining longer standing. Let us be comfortable! Will you not please take a chair!"

The door behind me was wide open still, as I satisfied myself with a glance in that direction. Moreover, the strange address I had been listening to had a curiously persuasive quality. I sat down as had been suggested, and the three of them did likewise.

"Dear me, dear me," said the Marquis Gaspard as he eased himself in his cushions. "You have left the door wide open, and a terrible draught is coming into the room!"

Hastily the Vicomte Antoine arose; but he was not so quick as I. I was at the door in a second and closed it with my own hands, making sure, meanwhile, that a simple latch was all that fastened it.

"Thanks, a thousand thanks!" exclaimed the marquis. "But, Monsieur le capitaine, why go to such extremes of courtesy? My grandson could have closed it just as well!"

I was already in my seat again, and the vicomte in his. There was a period of silence, in which my eyes had time to flit about the room. A couple of logs were glowing in the ancient fire-place. The candles about the walls were gleaming brightly. The beams in the ceiling were darkened from the smoke of the open fire during many years. The easy chairs I found quite beautiful in their upholstery of old brocade.

And there were my three hosts!

An uncontrollable astonishment now came over me, something far in excess of any of the surprises I had experienced heretofore. Those two more than centenarians in their long snow-white beards were respectively son and grandson of the third, who seemed to be, by far, the youngest of the three! His face, smooth shaven, had not the trace of a wrinkle. There was no suggestion of sunkenness about his eyes; just as his falsetto voice came from high in his throat without a tremor and without hesitation. And yet—such the situation seemed to be! He was indeed the ancestor par excellence, the veritable patriarch, and of an age that beggared the full many years of the fathers of Abraham!

But of what could I be really sure?

THE silence continued unbroken. Now we were in our chairs, the three of them facing me. They looked for all the world like a tribunal, with the marquis figuring as chief justice, and his son and grandson as associates. And I, what was I in that picture? Suspect? Defendant? A culprit awaiting sentence?

The silence lasted an unutterably long time. The three pairs of eyes fixed upon me eventually got on my nerves. To conceal my annoyance and self-consciousness, I turned my head and again examined the vast hall. It was a sort of living-room—low-studded—and not a parlor, nor a lounge. The woodwork on the chairs was gilded, and the upholstery, as I had before observed, was of old brocade.

The plastering was painted simply, without hangings, mirrors, or pictures, of any kind. Meagre, also, the furnishings: in addition to our four arm-chairs, two divans in the same style (an impeccable Louis XV), and two seats of fantastic form—*dormeuses,* one might have called them—with complicated rests for arms and feet and head, and so deep that they might have smothered rather than accommodated the human form.

I further noticed an old-fashioned clock and a chest, on opposite sides of the room, and then a kind of horse, or easel, such as painters use to incline their canvases according to the fall of light.

I was studying this latter object, when the Marquis Gaspard coughed, and then sneezed noisily. My eyes came back to him. He was holding a snuff box in his hand and had just taken a pinch from it. He returned the object to his pocket, and then began, evidently by way of introduction:

"Monsieur le capitaine, I am eager, before all else, to convince you of our good will in your regard, a good will that is absolute and which will prove, I trust, efficient. Changing times have done us wrong, to tell the truth; for to look at us, I suppose, one would take us rather for brigands of the wild than for amiable, well-intentioned gentlemen. And yet, we are not so bad as we seem, a fact of which you will, in the end, become aware."

The old man fell silent, took out his snuff box again, treated himself to another pinch, and then sat thinking for a moment.

"Monsieur," he resumed at last, "I should dislike being put into the position of matching wits with you. I prefer to rely on your honesty and honor as a soldier of France. I put the question quite bluntly therefore: Was it, or was it not, by pure chance, that you came, last evening, so very very close to this residence of ours?"

I did not have time to answer. He silenced me with a gesture and went on:

"Of course, I take a number of things for granted. You did not venture into this retreat for the purpose merely of paying us a visit! Far from that, monsieur! My vanity would not be crossed if I did not hear such an extravagant avowal on your part. I am quite ready to admit that before this evening our triple existence played a slight if any part at all in your normal thoughts and preoccupations. I am right on that point, am I not? Quite so! So much for that!

"Nevertheless, it is not inconceivable that your present trespass on our domain may be due to something more, a little something more, than plain simple chance. . . . May I expatiate: monsieur le vicomte, my grandson, found you some hours ago in an extraordinary place, to say the least. You were on your way from the Mort de Gauthier to the Grand Cap? Be it so! Heaven preserve me from doubting your assertion in the slightest. And yet, and yet!

"The fact is that to reach the point where the vicomte found you, you must have proceeded with your back persistently and repeatedly turned upon your goal. The brush and undergrowth on the mountains, I suppose, are by no means an easy problem for the wayfarer. To find one's way about therein requires no little presence of mind. Permit me, nevertheless, to express my great surprise that a gentleman of such talent as I perceive in you, a gentleman trained in cartography as the members of your distinguished profession are, should have gone so far, so very very far, astray, and over such rough and trying ground! My honor, Monsieur! Must one assume that some will-o'-the-wisp, running the heath to lure poor travellers to destruction, may have caught you in its spell! I suggest that hypothesis—one I am by no means loath to accept. So I ask you, Monsieur le capitaine: Was it such a wandering fay—an evil fairy of the deadliest lineage—that brought you to our refuge?"

He concluded, and fastened his eyes upon me.

FROM the first syllable in his quaintly formal discourse, I had foreseen the point at which he was ultimately to arrive. So I was not by any means taken unawares. His address, besides, had been a long one, and I had had plenty of time to make a supreme decision. When he came to his will-o'-the-wisp, my mind was quite made up. Gently my hand had made its way to my pocket and come to rest on my revolver. I had withdrawn my left leg from beneath my chair and stiffened the muscles of the calf. Ready to spring forward and mix in, I now looked up and answered without a tremor:

"Monsieur, will you not take your own choice? You have suggested chance, foxfire, fairies. Have it as you will. I have no reply to make. On the contrary I have a number of questions to put to you!"

He did not bat an eyelash, nor did the men to the left and right of him; but eventually a smile came to his lips and refused to fade as time went on. I got a good grip on my automatic.

"I have no intention," I resumed, "of matching wits with you either! I expect immediate frankness on your part; for you will find it to your interest, I assure you, not to prevaricate by a syllable. Shall we then come to the point without evasion? I ask you, monsieur: are you by any chance acquainted with a young lady, Madeleine de X . . . by name?"

I gave her name in full, of course.

The Marquis Gaspard, still smiling and more blandly if anything, nodded and waved his hand in emphasis of assent.

"Very well," said I. "I will go on. Monsieur, is it, or is it not, a fact, that this lady is a prisoner, at this moment, in this house?"

The hoary head was now slowly raised, while the same wide opened hand sketched a gesture of perplexity. The smile puckered into something expressive of incertitude.

"A prisoner?" said he. "That is hardly the word, Monsieur. It is a fact that the lady in question is, and at this moment as you say, honoring us with her distinguished presence in this house. But if, as I can now hardly doubt, you chanced to meet her on your way, you must have been able to see for yourself, Monsieur, that she was coming alone and of her own accord, with-

out constraint from anyone, to visit us under this roof where you wrongfully choose to call her a prisoner—as she is not, Monsieur, my word of honor!"

Whereupon, he settled back into his chair, and his ghoulish, ironical, joyous face stood out more clearly against the bright brocade of the cushions.

He had outmaneuvered me in the exchange, and for a second or two I was disconcerted. Then, however, I regained the offensive.

"As you will have it, Sir," I said. "I was wrong, in my choice of words: I confess my error. Madame de X . . . is a free woman here; and, accordingly, there is no reason why I should not be admitted to her presence at once, to offer her my respectful homage. May I see her? I am one of her friends, the most intimate of her friends, I might say."

The smiling, clean-shaven mouth relaxed into a broad laugh accentuated with little explosions of mirth in that queer falsetto.

"Oh, Monsieur le capitaine, you are telling us nothing we do not know, believe me, Sir. And rather, pray excuse the generous liberty I take in laughing at an affair such as yours and hers. I date from very long ago; and in my day, we were not so particular about secrecy in such matters. Let us pass on. I see that I have hurt your feelings by my inopportune mirth. No offense, I assure you. Let us forget that whole side of the subject. You ask to interview Madame de X. . . . Nothing, in fact, would be easier; but unfortunately, Madame de X . . . was feeling very tired, and went to bed, not long ago. She must now be in her first sleep; and I know you are far too much of a gentleman to disturb a lady under such conditions—to mention only the first of many obstacles to your satisfaction."

He was making fun of me; and my face burned hot with anger, as I fought the rage within me.

"I insist!" said I, mastering my indignation. "I promise further not to disturb Madame de X . . . if her first sleep is as deep and peaceful as you assert. But I insist on seeing her—and I have a right to, I should say, a right which I am certain you will not dispute."

At last the smile faded from the Marquis Gaspard's face. His eyes settled upon me searchingly, as he replied in an earnest voice.

"Monsieur le capitaine, you are, rest quite assured, in a position to ask everything in this house, without finding anything denied you. Will you follow me?"

HE AROSE, walked to the door, opened it, and stepped across the reception hall. I followed in his footsteps in nervous astonishment. The other two men also rose and came along behind me.

"Monsieur," said the marquis softly, "you are now able to understand, I trust, why you were several times requested to make no noise in your apartment, which is so close to this one. . . ."

I had guessed rightly, from the first. It was the room behind the door with the three long thick bolts, from under which the perfume so familiar to my nostrils had come—the fragrance of *muguet,* of lilies-of-the-valley. And it was just such a room as I had imagined later—a naked, sparsely furnished chamber like the one they had given to me; and the same bed with fine sheets and silken coverlets.

On that bed Madeleine was lying, her eyes closed, her lips white, her cheeks a leaden gray. They had told me the truth, also. She was asleep, too deeply, sunk in slumber, a strange, bloodless, icy slumber, nearer to death, perhaps, than to life.

"Monsieur will be mindful strictly of his promise," cautioned the Marquis Gaspard. "You have satisfied yourself that Madame is sleeping, soundly sleeping. I may add that she is so greatly fatigued that the shock of a sudden awakening might be fatal to her. . . ."

The words were uttered in a grave, solemn voice in striking contrast with the bantering tone he had hitherto adopted.

From the very depths of my being a cold, relentless anger rose, as a hurricane of winter rises on an unsheltered plain. Drawing my pistol, I turned sharply upon the man, my enemy, and, my finger upon the unlocked trigger, I pressed the muzzle against his heart. "Peace!" I commanded. "Not a word from any one of you, or I shoot this fellow like a dog! Now, you speak up, you, Sir, you! And the truth, as you value your life! This woman! What are you doing with her here?"

I had my eyes fixed upon those of the old man under my pistol.

And these began to glow, to glow, to glow! What was happening to me? For a second I was blinded, dazzled, dazed. Then a sudden panic seized on me. I felt my prey slipping from my clutches. With my last ounce of willpower I pressed upon the trigger; but the weapon did not go off. The eyes of my prisoner had fallen slowly.

quietly, deliberately from my eyes upon my hand. A viselike grip fell upon my fingers, paralyzing, bruising, crushing them. The automatic slipped from my grasp and fell to the floor. . . .

Then, in the same deep, solemn voice, coolly, calmly, as though nothing whatever had occurred, the Marquis Gaspard answered my question.

"What am I doing with this woman here? No query could be more natural, more legitimate, I am sure, Monsieur. I shall consider it a privilege to satisfy your curiosity. But perhaps Monsieur would prefer to return whence we came, to avoid any disturbance of Madame, in her slumbers."

My two arms were hanging loose at my sides. And my two legs were free. Nevertheless I felt bound hand and foot, unable to make the slightest movement save such as my master, the Marquis Gaspard, commanded. . . . A prisoner, body and soul, I obeyed in silence. I walked back toward the room we had left a few moments before. As I stepped through the door of Madeleine's chamber, I experienced a bitter longing to give her one more glance, one more, one more.

But it was not vouchsafed me to turn my head.

CHAPTER III

"MONSIEUR le capitaine," the marquis Gaspard began, "you are in a position to ask anything of us here, without its being denied you—anything except one thing—but of this we shall speak later. For the moment you have been good enough to question me in reference to Madame de X . . . and I should consider myself rude indeed, were I not to answer. The explanation may be longer than you expect, I dare say. That matters little! I am completely at your service; I am ready to satisfy your every desire! Forgive me this preamble, which may seem long extended. And forgive me also if I chance to bore you with a narrative which also may seem irrelevant, but the necessity of which I am sure you will recognize as we proceed."

He thought a moment. Then he drew his snuff box, opened it, offered a pinch to the man on his right and another to the man on his left, took one himself, and finally continued:

"Monsieur, I was born very far from here in a little town in Germany. It was in the year of Our Lord. . . ."

The old man stopped. Count Francois had leapt from his armchair and extended a broad flat hand before his father as though begging that latter to reveal no more. The Marquis Gaspard fell silent, in fact, for as long as three seconds, in the meantime looking steadily at his son, his lips perked into an expression of indulgent irony.

"I declare!" said he, eventually, in his queer falsetto voice. "That from you, Monsieur Francois, at your age! Will you never grow up, Sir? Imagine! Do you not suppose that Monsieur le capitaine is already well initiated, too well initiated, into the Secret? What matters it whether he stop where he is now, or go on to learn the rest of it?"

He turned toward me again and repeated:

"Monsieur, I was born in a little town in Germany, as I had the honor of informing you. It was at Eckernfoerde, not far from Schleswig, in the year of Our Lord, 1733! Yes, Monsieur!

"Today is the twenty-second of December, 1908. Figure it up yourself. I am one hundred and seventy-five years old! Don't be too much surprised, Monsieur. Such is the simple fact, and it will seem simpler still, as I progress with my explanation. If we were more at leisure and your curiosity should extend that far, it would be a great pleasure for me to give you a detailed story of my life; not, of course, of my whole life—that you would find a rambling, disconnected narrative, I am sure—but the more interesting moments, my first fifty years, let us say. That, however, would take us far afield, and the night, though a winter's one, would scarcely suffice for such a tale. Let us keep to essentials, therefore.

"My father was a gentleman, soldier in the service of His Majesty King Christian Sixth of Denmark. He had played a distinguished rôle in the wars of the preceding reigns; but his position was not brilliant at the court of this Prince, who was so wholly engrossed with the gentler arts of letters, science and society.

"All Europe, for that matter, was enjoying a period of quiet; and my father had to make the best of the situation, however hard it bore on him, a professional soldier. But the peace was of short duration, as the event proved; and I was just turning my seventh year when a new conflict broke out, with Austria, Prussia, and France leading scores of those little kingdoms which were forever fishing in the

troubled waters of Continental politics. However, Denmark was one of the few small states to keep her weapons sheathed.

"Under this disappointment my father chafed—refused to put up with it, in fact. He decided to go abroad to live.

"We moved first to Paris, then to Versailles, where Louis Fifteenth welcomed us cordially. A brilliant career was opening before my father, whose bravery in action soon attracted royal attention, when, on the tenth of May, 1745, just as the famous battle of Fontenoy was developing into a French triumph, an English bullet laid him low. To the victory my parent's gallantry had contributed not a little, and that, too, under the very eyes of the King himself. The latter, anxious that such distinguished service should not pass unrecognized, called me to his presence, and there, on the battle field, elevated me to the rank of royal page.

"This, Monsieur, was the beginning of my real life as a man—a life, I may add, that was for long carefree and joyous. I can still remember the placid delights of those years which all France enjoyed under the Treaty of 1747. At Court, especially, there was one round of festivals, revelries and intrigues of love, wherein I played my part as well as the next one; and I may even say that if today you see before you in my person a hermit, a man, at least, inclined to solitude, the fact must be attributed to the immense, the delicate felicity in which I passed my early days, a happiness whose sheer perfection has disgusted me forever with the banal pleasures which you people of this modern age could offer me if I cared for them. But why arouse in you the melancholy yearning for those golden days, which I feel? I will pass on, and pray forgive me if I have dwelt too much upon them as it is. I come, then, and tardily enough, to the main point.

"I said, Monsieur, that after 1745, from the date, that is, of my father's death on the field of honor, I was a page at the Court of Louis Fifteenth. In that capacity I was still serving five years later, in the year 1750. Indeed, it was my honor and my pleasure as a royal page, to escort the Maréchal de Belle Isle one day into the presence of His Majesty; the marshal, in turn, leading by the hand a rather handsome gentleman whose name was quite unknown to me.

" 'Sire,' the marshal began—(How his silky wig shone, as he made obeisance! And to me how glorious his purple coat seemed, thrown up in back by the studded scabbard of his sword!)—'Sire, I have the honor to present to your Majesty, as your Majesty deigned to command, Monsieur le Comte de Saint Germain, who, beyond all dispute, is the most aged gentleman of your kingdom.'

"MY EYES, I remember, turned upon the count in question," the marquis Gaspard went on. "And, quite to the contrary of his introduction, he seemed to me a man in the flower of youth. If he were a day older than thirty, there was not a reason in the world to suspect so.

"It is surely not my place, Monsieur le capitaine, to play the school-master for a man of your evident education. I am certain you are familiar with all that our historians have said about that extraordinary, that superhuman individual, known to successive generations as the Count of Saint Germain, the Marquis of Monferrat, Count Bellayme, Signor, Rotondo, Count Tzarogy, the Reverend Father Aymar, and so on.

"No, it was rather out of sense of filial regard than out of any desire to enlighten you, that I forgot myself so far as to recount the detailed story of my first and fortunate encounter with this personage whom I was later to revere as father, mother, master and friend, all in one. To be sure, the intimacy between him and me was not the outcome of this first meeting only. In the ten years following, between 1750 and 1760, that is, the Count of Saint Germain was one of the most frequent guests at the court of Versailles, and I continued as gentleman-in-waiting to the King.

"Thereafter intrigues and jealousies had their play, and the Count was no longer welcome. Unable by that time to live apart from the company of that distinguished genius, I determined to seek him out in his banishment. For long my search was vain. Free Masonry, of which he was the secret General and Grand Master, was keeping him in hiding—as I later learned, in Moscow, where he was plotting a sort of revolution. In despair at last of ever finding him, I abandoned my quest and, since now the thought of life in France had become intolerable to me, I decided to return to my old Danish home, establish a peaceful hearthfire there, and cultivate the memory of the prodigious friend whom I had lost.

"This I did. I went back to Eckernfoerde, to my ancestral mansion which had not been occupied for fully twenty-four years.

"It was now the year 1764. Denmark was still at peace, or virtually so. One single army indeed was campaigning in the Duchy of Mecklenburg, under the command of a young fellow, some twenty years of age, who gave promise of a most brilliant career in arms—the Landgrave Charles of Hesse-Cassel, I mean, whom King Christian Seventh was soon to nominate as his Lieutenant-General.

"The circumstances arose eventually whereby I was called upon to pay homage to His Highness, during a visit which he made, in the interval between two seasons in the field, to a palace of his at Eckernfoerde. Imagine my delight, Monsieur, imagine my boundless joy, when I discovered seated on his Highness's right hand and in the place of honor and confidence, the man whom I had everywhere been looking for and had given up for lost. The landgrave himself wept at sight of my emotion. Saint Germain was then living under the name of Tzarogy, dividing his time between the general, whom he was advising as privy councilor, and divers other lords and gentlemen to whom he was lending the assistance of his marvelous science. Prince Orlof was among these, I may mention, and His Highness, the Margrave Charles Alexander of Anspach....

"My own disappointments, alas, were not yet at an end, however; for, many times, I was still to be deprived of the society of this being who was growing from hour to hour more precious and more necessary to me. But finally my master ceased his wanderings. Prince Charles became, as I said, lieutenant-general to the new king, Christian Seventh; but, though war now broke out between Norway (a vassal state of ours) and Sweden, the new marshal was frequently at leisure; and this he spent in secret labors at which my master and I often assisted him.

"Fifteen years thus passed, years as solemnly and earnestly happy as the days I had spent in France had been wildly joyous. Then a horrible catastrophe came to destroy this long and perfect bliss. I referred casually, some moments ago, to the extreme youth my master had succeeded in preserving despite his unmeasurable age. That youth now suddenly began to depart from him, with a most apparent effect.

"I noticed the change, without daring for a time to make mention of it to him. But his health soon broke down to such a remarkable extent that I could not endure my silence. One day I threw myself at the count's feet and begged him to be more attentive to his well-being, indeed to make use of his own science in his own behalf. To my relief he took no offense at my presumptuousness, and lifting me tenderly to my feet, he said—in a deep sepulchral voice that froze my blood:

"'Gaspard, there are diseases against which the science to which you advise appeal is of no avail. My wisdom is helpless, for example, against a secret cancer of which my heart is bleeding: against a will I have—a determination on my part—not to be well again.'

"So speaking, he opened before my eyes a bejewelled medallion which he was wearing about his neck; and in it fastened to the gold, I perceived a ring of braided hair.

"'Gaspard,' he continued, 'I'm dying! My mistake was in trying to immortalize, not my maturer manhood, but my frivolous youth. Had I been a wiser man I should have assured—by a wrinkle or two, at least, and a few white hairs—this mortal envelop of mine against the shafts of love; in which case it might surely have become eternal. Now, when you have wholly acquired my Secret, profit by this mistake of mine, and, as my heir and continuator, show yourself worthy of the inheritance!'

"A week later he passed away. To his friend, the landgrave, he bequeathed his note-books, manuscripts, and talisman (all of which were so much Greek to that well-meaning warrior). To me he left what he called his 'Secret.'

"Monsieur le capitaine, when I began this account of my life, it was to the subject of this Secret, my legitimate heritage, that I intended eventually to come. I have arrived at last. Again I crave your pardon for my great prolixity. But without this long preamble I feared you would not really understand. Now, however, there is no reason in the world why I should not satisfy your curiosity, and without falsehood, reticence or evasion, answer your query as to what I, my son, my grandson here are doing with the girl you love, with Madame Madeleine de X. . . ."

ONCE more, the Marquis Gaspard drew his snuff-box and opened it. But this time he did not close it again. He held it wide open in the palm of his hand without taking his pinch of snuff.

"Monsieur," he resumed, "I am far from being a philosopher. On the subject of metaphysics I am quite as unpretentious

as you. Nevertheless, you and I know as much assuredly as any man in France about the real nature of that undefinable thing called Life. I say 'as much,' though I might well say 'as little'; for no one ever has known, or ever will know, anything really about Life.

"At the very most we are at liberty to guess at a few of the phenomena which accompany the existence of living beings on earth and which disappear on the advent of Death. My master, the Count of Saint Germain, never deluded himself on this point. Once he discovered the path we may follow with security, he contented himself with not departing from it by an inch, though the path itself he traversed in Seven League Boots, one might say, burning a very long candle at both ends! In his case, there was not, as commonplace minds have stupidly imagined, any trace of sorcery or magic. With him it was a matter of solid science, acquired by patient experiment—a matter of mentality, of genius, if you will—nothing more, nothing less, than that. The Secret, the Truth which he discovered, and which he bequeathed to me when he had tired of using it, the Secret of Long Life, the Secret of Never Dying—is a purely natural, a purely scientific affair. You yourself can be judge, Monsieur le capitaine.

"Not that I shall pretend to explain, to demonstrate, this Secret to you with the rigor mathematicians and physicists require in their sciences. My master might have presumed so much. For myself, I feel quite too ignorant even to venture on such a task. But, after all, what does that matter? All you want to know is what your friend, Madame de X . . . , has to do with it. Am I not right, Monsieur?

"Very well, Sir! To the point! We, Monsieur le capitaine, you, I, all of us, considered as living beings, are compounds of elements, so many bundles of atoms, or cells which latter come to life in us, live their lives, and die, to be replaced, in the end, by other similar elements, engendered of those before them. Trustworthy scientists have declared that the bodies we have today do not contain a single particle of the substances of which they were composed ten years ago. This incessant transformation, this constant renewal of ourselves, constitutes one of the distinctive traits of the Life to which I referred a moment since.

"This reconstruction, however, does not take place in the same way in every creature, nor the same way at all periods in one individual existence. When a child grows, for example, each old atom is replaced by several new ones. In old age, on the contrary, many atoms disappear while only a few successors take their places. Death occurs when the departing elements are no longer replaced at all.

"Monsieur le capitaine, this was the special fact which arrested my master's attention, and meditation on which revealed to him in the end the Secret I have the honor to be discussing with you—instead of sleeping, as I might normally and reasonably be doing, in some coffin already rotted from the years. And this Secret. . . .

"I will reveal it to you, Sir, and without flinching, dangerous as that may be. You, Monsieur, must I again remind you, are in a position to ask anything of us and always be contented—anything save one thing, of course; but this one thing is not the Secret. So then. . . .

"If we grow old, or if we die, the reason is that our atoms, our cells, have lost the power to engender others, the others which are essential for the prolongation of life—the reason is that our aged bodies have become inept at a task which our youthful constitutions perform at play, as it were, without effort. Well then, why not pass on a burden too heavy for our years to some other body, whose youth and vigor will do double duty—for itself and us—and quite willingly besides, not even perceiving the extra labor imposed upon it?

"I am not sure that any objections, any reasonable objection, can be raised to that. My master thought not, at least; and I am of his opinion. So are my son and my grandson here. And I take it, personal presumptuousness quite aside, that when it is a case of unanimity among four competent judges, all old men, and consequently the wiser from an experience not unusual but quite unprecedented, our opinion should be respected. I venture to hope, Monsieur le capitaine, that you will share it. . . .

"Madame Madeleine de X . . . , your friend, is here of her own free will, or virtually of her own free will, for the purpose of cooperating, generously, in our profit—in the task, that is, of rejuvenating our aged substances which, without her, could not recover of themselves. . . ."

In the pale hand of the Marquis Gaspard the snuffbox cover snapped, with a sharp though barely audible click; and he returned it to his pocket, this time without remembering to take his pinch of snuff.

I WAS still seated facing my three hosts, and nothing seemed changed between us. To all appearances, I was quite at liberty: no shackles, no bonds, impeded me; I was free to get up, walk around, make a fight of it. In reality an irresistible force, a crushing weight, had settled on my members. I was paralyzed in the most complete, the most atrocious sense of the word. To save my life, to save my soul, to save the woman I loved, I could not, even at the command of God himself, have been able to lift a finger or wink an eyelid.

The Marquis Gaspard finished his blood-curdling reply without interruption from me. I listened on in silence; my face falling quite to show the unspeakable horror convulsing through my inner self.

Now this man—this beast—of prey was silent for a moment. At times in the placid atmosphere of that room I had the creeping sensation of wings whirring about me—the weird ghoulish flight of vampires.

Suddenly the Marquis Gaspard spoke up anew:

"Monsieur le capitaine, I am inclined to suppose that now your curiosity is satisfied; but should there remain some shadow of doubt in your mind still, should there be any point I have not yet made entirely clear, please consider me at your disposal quite. In my opinion—I know it is but a humble one—it were best all around that we understand each other perfectly, leaving nothing, absolutely nothing, in the dark. You will be patient, therefore, if I supplement my recent explanation with a few observations in detail—and kindly pardon me, if I seem to do all the talking. For that matter, I do not insist. You may be bored insufferably for instance. In that even you are quite at liberty to make your escape—you might go to bed again, for one thing. The narrative I have just completed seemed to me essential to an accurate understanding of the facts. On the other hand, what I was minded to tell you now is not wholly indispensable. I should not be in the least offended if you thought best not to hear it. . . .

"To proceed then, Madame Madeleine de X. . . . , a friend of yours, is here, as you now know, to work, with the best of her soul and body, for our benefit; and specifically for the purpose of renewing, of rejuvenating, the physical substance of us three. Now I know how you love this lady; and I am quite ready to assume that you would be interested in hearing more of the marvelous things she does for us, and for which we are indeed her debtors. I should feel remiss in concealing anything on such a delicate matter.

"Monsieur le capitaine, I shall not inflict upon you a review I might make—dull, dry, wearisome it would almost certainly be—of the efforts men—and by men, I mean physicians more particularly—have made to transfuse a life that is young into bodies that are old. I use the word 'transfuse,' my mind reverting to a crude experiment resorted to from time to time (with no success worth mentioning) and which consists in a simple transfer of blood from a strong man to a weaker one. Folderol! Balderdash! Charlatanry! What else could you expect from doctors of medicine, so called? Among donkeys your physician is the prize ass! And I cannot understand how your age, Monsieur le capitaine, the Twentieth Century of Our Lord's era, can take so seriously these fakirs who, in my time, I assure you, were appraised at a far juster worth.

"That, however, is beside the point. I need not remind you—you must surely have guessed as much yourself—that my master made no use of medical devices in arriving at his astonishing results. His pride it was to be a chemist, not to say an alchemist, as he would have said. He was no mere horse-doctor. He was no mere barber. His discerning eye was fixed on the mysterious depths of the test tube, not on the point of a brutal butcher-knife. And he discovered. . . .

"Just when, I do not know. It is well authenticated that Count de Saint Germain lived several centuries, a fact explainable only on the assumption that the Secret of Long Life must be of very ancient origin. I stress this fact, for the glory of my master is but enhanced thereby. Our Secret, indeed, has a number of curious analogies with the electric or magnetic appliances the invention of which is the glory of the present age. Just consider then how far ahead of his time this great man was! But in speaking of electricity I am not, believe me, thinking of the primitive tricks that were known even to men of old. No, my master did not waste his time in drawing sparks from a cat's tail nor in making bull-frogs dance to music. But he did manipulate the philosopher's stone most handily, and he was able to dispense with mercury when he chose to plate with silver or with gold.

"I remember that many a time, just in play one might say, he would amuse us by transferring the metal of one object to

the surface of another object of a different metal; and this he did by means of electric batteries, of which, precisely, he was an independent inventor; though he used other processes still, quite so far from being supernatural as they were kindred to the marvelous. But he did not stop at so little, for these things were mere child's play to him.

"I saw him, with my own eyes, one day, take a branch from a rose-bush with two roses on it and one bud, not to mention the leaves, and transport the whole in some mysterious way through a thick partition, in which the doors were sealed, into an adjoining room. Little by little the rose-branch wasted away before our eyes and as gradually reassembled in another place.

"That experiment impressed me, I can tell you, Sir; though the Count assured me there was nothing very remarkable about it, since any substance could be disintegrated for a certain length of time into incredibly minute atoms which made light of passing through such coarsely textured obstacles as wooden doors, or brick and plaster walls. 'The time will come,' he used to say, 'when *matter* and *movement*, which, moreover, are identical, can be *exteriorized*, much as smells, sounds, or light are normally at present.'

"It would be scant flattery to your acumen, Monsieur le capitaine, were I now to fear you had not guessed the general method of our Secret. Just as a mass of pure gold, suitably moistened in an appropriate liquid and acted upon by current from an electric battery of an appropriate force, may be broken up and distributed toward a mass of plain iron so placed as to be receptive of such action; so a living creature, likewise placed in a favorable environment and subjected to a magnetic energy of proper strength, gives up its cells in certain numbers and transmits them to another living creature stationed at a point where they may be received and assimilated. There, Monsieur le capitaine, you have our 'process'—if I may borrow a term from the jargon of your modern alchemists.

"You must be aware by this time, Sir, that I am seeking to hide nothing from you, that I come down indeed to very perilous details. I will go even so far as to add that the conditions favorable for this operation may be found in any room whatever, provided such room be tightly closed, perfectly silent, and darkened to a half light; and provided also, it be laid on a line from North to South. This latter specification is necessary in order to keep at sufficient tension (by drawing on the magnetic forces of the Earth itself) the magnetic current which for its part, any strong and wilful man can find in his own physical being when he so pleases.

"Now, Monsieur le capitaine, I dare hope you have been furnished with all the facts that you desired to know?"

THE invincible, all powerful clutch which fastened me helpless to my chair, seemed to have paralyzed my tongue and some of the functions even of my brain. I was in full possession of consciousness. I could still think clearly and logically; and I could feel—what despair indeed was mine! But volition, the power to act, had left me; and my combativeness, also, my rage, my fury against these drinkers of human blood, these assassins of the girl I loved, were weakening, vacillating, melting away, into a hazy, vaporous, indistinct emotion.

The Marquis Gaspard, after a pause, was again speaking, with that same obtrusive, labored, sinister urbanity.

"Monsieur le capitaine," said he, "at the risk of seeming intolerably repetitious, I here must revert to something I have mentioned at least twice before, the fact, to wit, that everything under this roof is at your beck and call, without fear or refusal, save one single thing. Eventually, alas, we shall be constrained to broach the painful subject of that single thing, which, to our extreme regret, we shall have perforce to deny you. Will you not, therefore, carefully examine your mind in all its nooks and corners the better to acquaint us—and as specifically as possible—with all your desires? My honor as a gentleman, they will be satisfied, if the satisfaction be within our power."

He fell silent, and looked up as though expecting me to speak. Indeed, with the final syllables of his last phrase, a curious, and very complex, sensation began coursing through me. At first, it was a sort of tingling in all my veins and arteries; where my blood seemed to be moving faster as my heart beat with a gradually increasing force.

Then I began to understand: little by little, by imperceptible degrees, the control over me was slackening; an influence which my mind could not comprehend was lifting the weight that had settled on my limbs. I was not free, by any means; but neither was I completely helpless as be-

fore; so that, when the Marquis Gaspard repeated his question, directly, this time, and without so many mellifluous detours—"Monsieur, what do you wish?"—I was able to answer easily, and with absolute sincerity.

And answer I did—an answer that expressed the deepest, most ardent feeling in my heart: "There is nothing I wish, Monsieur. Kill me, as you have killed the girl I love. But kill me quickly: I am ready!"

In reply the Marquis Gaspard, as he had so often done before, laughed a laugh in that queer falsetto voice of his; and therewith, on the instant, the mysterious weight came down again upon my shoulders, while the clutch tightened again upon my nerves and muscles. Once more I was a prisoner, securely bound, my tongue clinging limp and lifeless to my teeth. Inert, body and soul, I felt the ironical voice of my conqueror again leaving me with its scalding mirth.

"My word, Monsieur le capitaine! What are you dreaming of? Badly indeed I must have expressed myself! Are you not taking me for some *feu* Cartouche of the good old days, for some Monsieur de Paris, perhaps? Hah! Hah!"

And this time, as he laughed, he shrugged his shoulders in affected resignation; and I found a certain ironic exaggeration in the sweep of the hand with which he again took out his snuffbox.

"Well," he continued, "I can see there is no help for it. Another bit of glossing will be far from wasted here. Your pardon, Monsieur le capitaine, if I, who should not, remind you, that the three men you see before you are three of the most reputable gentlemen of the Kingdom of France. This right hand of mine was never soiled with a drop of blood. Count Francois here, born in 1770, grew up in the days of your Revolution and was a 'philosopher' of the Jean Jacques style in the days when Rousseau was all the rage. Believe me, what he saw of the France of that time, a nation gone entirely mad, and bent on turning into a slaughter-house, disgusted him forever with Samsons and guillotines. As for the Vicomte Antoine, he came into the world in season to figure among those *enfants du siècle* who borrowed the pen of Alfred de Musset to wring the hearts of an admiring world with words of tender lassitude and languishing despair. Poor makings for a cannibal in truth, monsieur! No, I can see the effects of the reading people do in these modern days. Too many novels, too many novels! A bad diet, I take it, for impressionable, imaginative minds. Who said a word here about killing anybody? The idea of putting you—or Madame de X... —to death had not occurred to us in the remotest degree.

"Count Francois, as I may have intimated, has a bit of the moralist under his skin. Give him half a chance and he starts preaching at you! Well, he will explain, if you choose to ask him, and have the patience to bear the consequences, how wholly improper it would be for men possessing the Secret of Long Life, for men who really know what Living means, to deprive simple ordinary people of any portion of that brief course which leads them unfailingly and miserably to the Hereafter.

"We have the Powers Above to thank, Monsieur, that our Secret, *the* Secret, makes (barring a few chance exceptions so infrequent as to be negligible), no cruel demands upon us. So far, Monsieur le capitaine, I have added a full century to my appointed years. Believe me, none of those additional days have I stolen from the lives of others. No, we are not of those who kill! Can you, Monsieur, a soldier, say as much? Many young people, to be sure, boys and girls alike, have passed through our laboratory. That I cannot deny. Nor could I swear that they departed thence without leaving something of their ultimate vitality. But, at the worst, their loss was a very slight, a very unappreciable one, Monsieur le capitaine; and this loss I might condone with the reflection that a single extra day of life for an ancient sage like me ought surely be worth some sacrifice—a sacrifice, I repeat, quite exceptional in point of fact, since all of the contributors on whom we draw, having once accomplished their generous task, return safe, sound and happy to their normal pursuits.

"Your friend, for instance, Madame de X . . . , is by no means so far gone as you imagine. When, tomorrow evening, she goes back to her home from another trip to . . . Beaulieu, no one will take the trouble to observe that she is lighter by some pounds than at the time she went away—a relatively few ounces of blood, and bone, and flesh, which we have claimed from her youthful substance. Concede the fact yourself, Monsieur le capitaine: your indignation was a bit excessive.

"So now, I suppose, we are at the end of our misunderstandings. From what you have just said I gather simply that you have no particular desires except, I dare

say, an early solution of your Adventure. In the latter case, Monsieur, we might proceed. What do you say? Shall we look for such a solution in a friendly spirit . . . together?"

Again the iron grasp upon my being was loosened for a fraction of a second; I was permitted to nod in acquiescence.

THE Marquis Gaspard hitched about in his chair; and, as his body lay back in the deep cushions, I noticed, on either of the arms of gilded wood, a small withered hand, the desiccated skin of which, faultlessly manicured, was as glossy as ancient ivory. The Count Francois and the Vicomte Antoine, whether of their own accord or in imitation of their respective parent and grand-parent, relaxed into similar comfortable positions, their hands also, broader and less wasted, likewise resting on their carved chair-arms—which they quite encircled, what with fingers and palm. I could not help observing these details; for a clear, definite conviction mysteriously seized upon my mind that those talons, of such innocent and genteel exteriors, had their nails somehow buried in every part of my tortured flesh.

The marquis was again speaking: "Monsieur le capitaine, I consider you an intelligent man; and I will not do you the injustice of supposing for an instant that you have failed to divine the nature of the restriction which I have always been careful to introduce expressly into all my offers of service and hospitality. The time has come—believe me, I am more pained than you thereat—for us to touch more directly upon this restriction. As I have repeatedly assured you, Monsieur le capitaine, our house is wholly, entirely, absolutely at your disposal; but you will understand, knowing what you know, that you will never be allowed to depart from it. Everything here is yours for the asking, everything! Everything save one single thing: your freedom!

"In thus detaining you against your will, our sorrow, Monsieur le capitaine, knows no bounds, no bounds whatever. I say that in behalf of the three of us; for I know that the count here, and the vicomte, feel the same regret as I. But what else can we do? In our heart of hearts, we regard ourselves as absolutely not responsible for any of the consequences that may result from your visit to our abode. Chance, and your own—very pardonable—curiosity, are to blame. A thousand to one chance—and it went against you!

"It was your ridiculously unreasonable misfortune to have seen last evening something that no mortal man could be allowed to see: Madame de X . . . on the Col de la Mort de Gauthier. But your bad luck did not end even there. In your rambling search for your lady, it was your second mischance to come dangerously near our refuge. From this point on we were helpless. Knowing, perhaps, that we exist, knowing perhaps where we live, knowing perhaps the kind of visits we are occasionally obliged to receive, you know far too much, Monsieur le capitaine; for the Secret preserves its efficacy only so long as it remains a Secret. It must, by nature, be the exclusive appanage of a few Living Men. Let the generality of Mortals even suspect of its existence, and it is finished.

"Our Secret, you see, Monsieur, is an essentially aristocratic one. Its exercise presupposes the subservience of a great number of inferior creatures, who must endure labor, suffering and fatigue for the profit and welfare of a few master beings. I need not remind you that the humanitarian prejudices, the democratic sentimentality, of the present age would not take kindly to such a notion. Your politicians, who flatter and fawn on a vugar demos more vilely than any of my comrades, the royal pages, ever courted the *Roi Bien Aimé*, would tear up their hair in oratoric indignation if they ever discovered that for the past hundred and seventy-five years one man has been allowing himself to avoid death in defiance of all equalitarian principles. So much so, Monsieur le capitaine, that we three, among the most well-intentioned gentlemen in the Kingdom, as I boasted not long since, find ourselves obliged to hide like brigands in this out-of-the-way spot, and behind a labyrinth of boulders, precipices, and thickets certain to keep all intruders away.

"In the circumstances, our embarrassment should not be hard to understand. You have happened on us, Monsieur le capitaine, much as a wasp might strike into a spider's web, tearing everything to pieces. If you were left at liberty to return whence you came, carrying the shreds of our Secret in your pockets, it would be the jolly end of us, now would it not? I am speaking, as you well realize, without a trace of exaggeration.

"CONSIDER a moment, Monsieur le capitaine! Try to imagine the prodigies of prudence and cunning we have had to perform, the limitless sacrifices we

have had to make, to ensure our safety and our independence in the various countries where we have had to live. For one thing, we have always been moving from this place to that. The business of a Wandering Jew would be child's play compared with our many flights and migrations. But the discomforts attendant on such things have been the least of our troubles.

"Monsieur le capitaine, when my master died, I was still a comparatively young man, and Francois here was a mere boy. His mother I had married twenty years before, in France—still young and beautiful she was, and as strict in her loyalty to her husband as conjugal happiness demands—neither too much nor too little, that is. I loved her dearly; and my great joy, at first, was to think of taking her along with me to share the new destiny I had in store. But then I reflected: was it wise, was it prudent, to entrust a woman a Secret on the keeping of which depended whether I should come to be another Count de Saint Germain, and perhaps, indeed, an older and a more learned one? Could I stake, on a female's discretion and wisdom, the outcome of a game to last for years and years, when winning would make us literally immortal, and a single uncautious word would spell certain ruin? Alas! You understand: I could not!

"I submitted accordingly, Monsieur le capitaine, to the torture of seeing the mother of my only child perish before my very eyes, while, all along, I could have preserved forever the smile on her lips and the sweetness of her caresses. Such a price the continuance of our lives as Living Men exacted. And twenty years thereafter, my son, in his turn, to prevent the Secret of Long Life from becoming entangled in skirts, sacrificed his wife.

"Such facts, will enable you, Monsieur le capitaine, to estimate the value of this formidable knowledge, which we have preferred to two lives no less precious, you must admit, than your own. I have said two lives, with a view to a reasonable statistic. There may have been more. A few moments ago you saw how pale and weakened your friend, Madame de X..., appeared. It is no simple matter to give up some eight or ten pounds of living substance to another person.... Then, there are the accidents to take account of.... We have had such lamentable occurrences to regret, unfortunately . . . though very few, very very few....

"In any event, you can see that the ransom of our lives must be a heavy one, though a capricious Circumstance has decreed that others should pay it for us.... Alas, Monsieur le capitaine! You surely will not be surprised if it has fallen to you now to assume a portion of the cost. . . .

"You must, in short, pay something; and I am certain I can rely, in such a matter, on your liberality as a gentleman of parts. ... What puzzles me rather is the kind of currency that might be passed between us. . . ."

At this point he broke off, and looked first at the one and then at the other of his two companions, who, first one and then the other, wagged their heads in doubt. A moment or so must thus have passed.

"Monsieur le capitaine," the marquis suddenly resumed; "if we were living a hundred years earlier, in 1808 instead of 1908, our difficulties would be easily superable. For, I must tell you: this is not the first time we have been embarrassed by the inconvenient presence with us of an intruder—living or dead as the case may be. Forgive my using such a term for you; it is accurate, however seemingly discourteous.

"Yes, I remember, to mention only one such episode, a poor Neapolitan who, some eight odd years ago, died in our house most inopportunely. We were living in Naples at the time. The police service of the Bourbons was a pretty ramshackle affair; none the less I was afraid of considerable annoyance, should it ever occur to the Gentlemen of the Guard to ask how that particular person happened to be found dead so far from his own home. I decided to anticipate any discreet inquisitiveness. A felucca from Malta happened to be lying in port. We went aboard long before any one in town could possibly have begun to work up interest in the death of that unfortunate man. The felucca set sail; and no one found any objection to raise against the departure of three kind-hearted old gentlemen noted for the promptness with which they paid their bills. From Malta we took another boat to Cadiz; and from Cadiz we went on to Seville, where we were sure no citizen of the Two Sicilies would ever suspect our presence.

"But nowadays, alas, the earth has become much smaller, and the telegraph, especially, has seriously complicated our manner of living. Take your case, Monsieur le capitaine. I have no doubt that in the course of the next few hours, any number of official dispatches will be sent out over

all this region, broadcasting the news that you are missing and asking light on the mysterious failure of your mission.

"There is another difficulty. At the time of our settling here, I was obliged, through the obnoxious provisions of French law, to make a declaration before your magistrates, in order to acquire legal title to this homestead. So you see, the authorities know who I am; or at least they think they know who I am. You can rely upon it: if you were to drop out of sight, an army of detectives would come looking for you, and turn this house upside down from cellar to attic. You know that I am right. Well, there we are, in a blind alley as it were. We cannot let you go away, alive and free, as you came. Nor can we keep you here, a prisoner—or a corpse. . . ."

Again he broke off. Then inclining his head slightly to one side, and pushing his lips forward into a grimace of amusement, he laughed once more in the same thin, high-pitched, crackling tone.

"I SEEM to note a movement of surprise in you," he now continued. "I imagine you are thinking of your friend, Madame de X . . . , and you are objecting that she comes here, goes away, comes back again, and that others, doubtless, of our contributors do likewise without any untoward consequence resulting. And you are right. But do you suppose that she or any one of her co-workers knows the slightest things about us and about what we are doing, that any one of them is in the least conscious of the philanthropic service he or she is rendering?

"Monsieur le capitaine, our disposition to solitude has always inclined us to choose very secluded spots for our abode in whatever neighborhoods we were living. The road to our door is necessarily a long one, and our guests would have good reason to complain had we not, from the very outset, devised a means of sinking them into an hypnotic slumber which spares them all consciousness of fatigue. On such a system, for that matter, our security itself depends, as you can readily see. By virtue of it, we were able, whenever we set up our household for ten or twenty years in some hospitable region, to survey the inhabitants for their strongest and most robust members, to select, in the end, those who are freest and most independent in their habits and manner of living. These latter, only, become collaborators in our Secret. And may I, in this connection, reassure you, in case there should be some temptation to jealousy on your part: Madame de X . . . was not chosen by us for her pretty eyes, though these may, I grant you, be the brightest pair in the world; but because she lives, for most of the time, quite apart from any relatives, and because her country house, situated at some distance from Toulon, requires frequent protracted absences from the city; and her occasional disappearances are not, therefore, likely to cause uneasiness in her husband or in any of her friends. I hope, now, Monsieur le capitaine, that your mind is at rest on that point. . . .

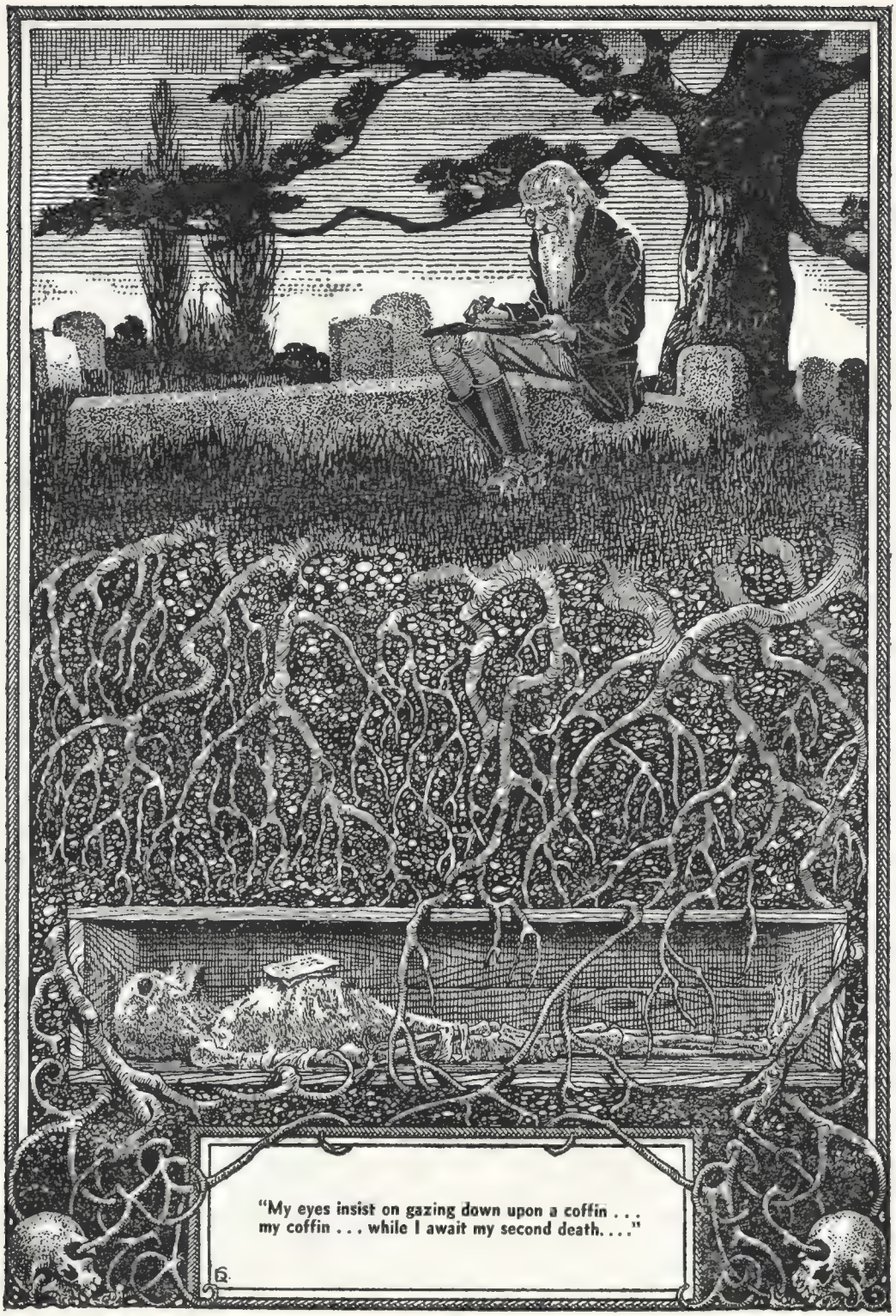
". . . as I wish mine were on the issue of your adventure! We have reached this conclusion in our talk thus far: that you cannot leave this place alive and free; on the other hand, you cannot remain here a prisoner, and much less a corpse. Oh, of course, we might conceivably take unfair advantage of the situation you are in, kill you, and carry your body to some place where no possible suspicion could fall upon us. But for all you may be thinking or may actually have said, we are not murderers, Monsieur le capitaine, nor anything resembling murderers. For that reason we shall not kill you, even were the temptation to do so to be very great indeed. . . .

"Such being the case, our problem is to discover some way of not killing you . . . a problem which I regard as difficult enough to merit consulting the views of each of us, yours included, Monsieur le capitaine!"

The marquis once more opened his snuffbox and offered a pinch first to the count and then to the vicomte. Then he helped himself; and this time he sneezed, voluptuously, into his handkerchief.

EACH in turn, at a deferential nod of their respective father and grandfather, first the count and then the vicomte proffered their suggestions; and so long had I been listening to the shrill falsetto of the marquis, that the sharp, low-pitched enunciation of the other two almost made me start with surprise, paralyzed though I was.

"Monsieur," said the count, addressing the Marquis Gaspard, "you are right on every point; and especially in what you said of the danger we incur from the presence of Monsieur le capitaine in this place —a danger enhanced by the fact that Madame de X... is likewise our guest at the present moment. We cannot think of sending her away before this evening, whether to Toulon or to Solliès. That


"My eyes insist on gazing down upon a coffin . . . ;
my coffin . . . while I await my second death. . . ."

would expose her too soon to the fatigue of the return journey.

"She is still extremely weak, and neither you nor I, in the very worst circumstances, would consent to risking an innocent life. Now tomorrow morning, this neighborhood will be full of soldiers—we can depend upon that. For, obviously, Monsieur is very close to the governor: his absence will be noticed, and a thorough search made. We have every reason to fear a visit ourselves; and in such an unfortunate event we shall be compelled to conceal two persons instead of one: a double danger, if you think as I think."

"I do," said the marquis.

The count bowed and proceeded:

"The path of virtue is not the easiest to follow in a case like this; no end of criminal or treacherous devices suggest themselves for relieving us of our present embarrassment. To mention one: few people in Toulon are unaware of the friendship existing between Madame de X . . . and Monsieur le capitaine. It would be a simple matter to account for his disappearance by turning suspicion upon this estimable young lady. Can there be any doubt of that? Tomorrow police and soldiery will be searching this territory inch by inch. On the Mort de Gauthier, not far from the carcass of Monsieur's horse—that clue it is too late to obliterate—they find the captain's sweetheart. Nothing more would be necessary: of course—a 'crime passionel,' served to the taste of the metropolitan press! The work of a jealous woman!

"The eagerness of the public to accept such an exciting hypothesis would divert all attention from us without fail. And Madame de X . . . , mark you, would meanwhile be unable to defend herself from a charge the very monstrousness of which would quite confound her. That unfortunate girl could never explain to herself, let alone to her judges, her incomprehensible presence in such improbable surroundings."

The Vicomte Antoine had raised his head. "Such barbarity, such cowardice, would be worse than murder outright and stain our hands darker than with blood: you would make us the vilest of cads, Monsieur."

There was an abundance of heat in his tone. The count turned toward him and bowed with a nod of approval.

"I agree with you, and no rational gentleman devoted to a life in accord with Nature, would ever allow an innocent head to fall under an unjust punishment. But observe, nevertheless: no court would ever convict the lady on pure supposition; and all direct evidence of a crime would be wanting. . . ."

The vicomte interrupted: "I grant you that a court might acquit, Monsieur; but the public never. And this woman, convicted through our agency of having lived according to her heart, would be the victim of general hostility and opprobrium. Her honor would be smirched forever, and her life ruined."

"That is true," the count again admitted.

The squeaky laugh of the marquis took them both to task:

"Enough gentlemen! Spare us your preciosities, I beg of you. There you are, at it again, indulging your usual fatuities in behalf of the widowed mother and her ten children! Will you gentlemen never tire of sentimentalizing—p l a y i n g with those soap-bubbles of yours: Humanity, Fraternity, Love, Nature?

"Does neither of you see that the security of our Secret is perhaps of more importance than the so-called good name of a woman who has already, of her own accord, made herself the talk of a county? The solution you have suggested, Sir, is by no means unworthy of consideration. I do not, however, regard it as the best. I think that before deciding on any course we should review all the possibilities before us. It is your turn, Vicomte. Have you something practicable to propose?"

The youngest of the three men hesitated. Finally he said:

"May it not be that the solution lies in the very magnetic forces over which we have control? I am thinking of yours particularly, Monsieur, so prodigiously powerful, when you choose to exert them. It has occurred to me that we might send the captain home, free to all appearances, but still retained such an influence that every word he uttered would be dictated by us. We could gain some days in that way; and then. . . ."

The smile on the lips of the marquis was almost a sneer.

"Then what?" he questioned.

The vicomte failed to find an answer, and the marquis supplied one for him.

"Then . . . nothing! Where could such a comedy end? How long do you think we could stand the strain? It is no easy matter to keep our hold on an old man ready for the grave. Could we, without a moment's respite, and till the end of the world, suppress the individuality of a man

like Monsieur le capitaine, youthful, robust of body, and strong of will? Nonsense, Monsieur! Utter nonsense! Find something better than that, Vicomte. Come, gentlemen, you have heads! Use them!"

But the count and the vicomte added not a word. The staccato laugh of the marquis alone continued to grate through the silence of the hall.

CHAPTER IV

SUDDENLY my flaccid arteries began to dilate again under stronger pulsations of my heart. As had been my experience a few moments earlier, a diffuse tingling spread through all my fibres, and the paralyzing grasp upon me was relaxed anew. But on previous occasions my freedom had been only half restored and for very brief intervals. Now I was free, free from head to foot—a liberty without any restraint whatever; and the sensation of possessing it was destined to endur . I raised my head in astonishment. On my eyes the eyes of the marquis rested; but no imperious commands were emanating from them now.

Temptation flashed across my mind: to leap from my chair, spring upon my captors, and, disarmed as I was, make a fight to the death against them. And a second thought also came to me: the thought of fleeing.

But I contented myself in the end with a shrug of the shoulders. What could I do, after all? Speedier than my flight, more powerful than any violence, the unerring glance darting from the old man's eyes would have halted me, overwhelmed me—that I well knew. If indeed he was now loosening the unseen bonds that held me, much as shackles are removed from a prisoner once the doors of the gaol are closed, I was in reality no less a captive than before; and any strength I may have had, though I was now ostensibly free to use it, seemed hardly dangerous to my three antagonists.

So I sat there motionless in my chair.

When the marquis now addressed me it was in a very gentle tone indeed.

"Monsieur le capitaine," said he, "I am sure you are at present in a much more reasonable frame of mind and that you understand perfectly at last the kind of people with whom you are dealing: just plain decent people like yourself—only a great deal older, and with lives, for that reason, necessarily more precious. Yes, that is the whole question, really: to safeguard, first of all, these marvelous, virtually immortal lives we three are living, and then, if, and so far as possible, to do something for you; just as we always do the best we can for the men and women who serve us in the manner I have explained. A simple situation, isn't it?

"I am inclined to trust your sense of fair play, Monsieur le capitaine. You will admit that we have treated you considerately thus far, refraining from unseemly harshness even when you had tried our patience sorely. Our desire you see, is to regard you not as an enemy but as an ally, a co-worker, a friend. Fundamentally both you and we have the same object in view. That enables me, without further delay, to invite you to take a part in our deliberations. You have heard what has just been said. Unfortunately no workable plan seems to have come from it. I wonder whether you, perchance, can think of some egress from our difficulties?"

I beseech you—you who read these lines that I am writing, struggling perhaps to decipher the crude scrawling of this pencil now worn to the wood, bear me witness that my Adventure was a terrible adventure, fraught with a horror beyond humanity, beyond life. All that night long—it was my last night, remember—I was not my normal self, but rather like a dreamer caught in the terrors of some ghastly nightmare; and if I chanced, while groping in the depths of that abyss, to forget, for a moment, that I was a man, and was able to think, for a moment, of betraying the cause of Men, of Mortal Men, for the profit and comfort of the Men of Prey, the Ever-living Men, do you who read my full confession, measure my weakness with the measure of your own; and do not condemn me lightly!

Yes, of just that I was guilty! And any crime was in vain.

When the Marquis Gaspard had twice repeated his question: "Can you, perchance, think of some egress from our difficulties?" I, yes, I, André Narcy with lowered head and cheeks aflame, made the answer. And I answered with these literal words.

"Monsieur, open your doors and let me depart in peace; and let Madame de X..., the girl I love, go also. Give me your word of honor as a gentleman that this lady will never again be called to this house; and I, for my part, will give my word of honor as a soldier, never to breathe a word to living person, man or woman, free mason or priest, of anything that I have

seen or heard here, or even of your existence!"

The Marquis Gaspard was on his feet almost before I had finished.

"Monsieur," said he, with a wave of the hand, "I congratulate you! That is what I had been hoping to hear! Your proposal affords me unbounded satisfaction: I would fain see in it the beginning of a perfect understanding between us, with promise of the further success certain to spring from such perfect accord."

He sat down again, felt his pockets for his snuff box, took it out, reflected a moment, and then, with another toss of the head, resumed:

"Alas, Monsieur, I am deeply pained at my inability to accept, offhand, a proposition in itself so generous. Pray do not mistake my meaning: I have the sincerest regard for your word of honor as a soldier. I hold for it the same high esteem which you profess for my word of honor as a gentleman. Both, we may rest assured, are of pure alloy, more precious than gold, more trusty than steel. I have implicit confidence in you, Monsieur le capitaine, as you will have the charity to believe! But—have you considered carefully, Monsieur le capitaine? The Secret which you would take in trust so courageously is a burden that weighs more heavily than you realize perhaps. What is needed to betray it? A word merely, a single imprudent word! Who, other than a man bereft of speech, could undertake to withhold such a word eternally?

"Why, Monsieur le capitaine, how can one deny it? Look at the matter as it actually stands! I ask you: do you never talk in your sleep? Can you be certain never to have a fever, a delirium? That might be enough! That might be enough! You can see the point, I am sure: good faith, by itself, has no practical value in such a serious circumstance. It is no discourtesy to you if we must reject, to our extreme regret, the offer of a promise which might be dangerous to the honor of the man brave enough to make it—with the most earnest intentions, as I know."

The old man here bowed to me with a very formal deference. When he proceeded, it was with a change of tone.

"But, whatever the course we are finally to adopt, it would help to know with reasonable accuracy, beforehand, whether we may be exaggerating the probability of immediate danger. Monsieur le capitaine, no one is better placed than you to enlighten us on that detail. Will you not tell us therefore: are we right, or are we wrong, in assuming that, with this coming dawn, a patrol will begin looking for you in this neighborhood?"

Without speaking, I nodded in the affirmative.

"Ah," commented the marquis, with deep concern.

He sat thinking for some moments.

"Your horse," he finally continued, "they tell me its carcass is lying out there on the Col de la Mort de Gauthier."

Again I nodded.

His next words were uttered in a subdued tone almost as though he were thinking aloud to himself.

"So the real search will begin there! The important thing is to have it a brief one. Time is a capital consideration. The speediest solution should be the best. . . ."

HE HAD opened his snuff box, and with one of his fingers was stirring the tobacco about, absent-mindedly.

"Beyond a doubt. . . . The danger will be less in proportion as it be brief. . . . Those people will hunt and hunt and keep hunting for a long time. . . . A long time, except on one condition. . . ."

He looked at me, and once or twice again he tossed his head in his characteristic manner.

"Except on one condition—the condition that they find immediately . . . what they are looking for! What would satisfy them? You, of course, nothing, nobody else—you, alive or dead . . . preferably dead! . . ."

I was certain he was preparing to broach the subject of assassination; and I had quite prepared myself.

"I am in your power," I observed coldly.

But the marquis frowned and answered curtly

"Monsieur le capitaine, I thought I had explained to you that we would not kill you even were the failure to do so to cost us dearly."

He shrugged his shoulders; and then, turning to his two companions, he said:

"I see no alternative: we must organize, stage as it were, some ingenious situation fit to deceive those investigators, who, for that matter, start with no prepossessions, and are a very ordinary lot of numbskulls into the bargain. It will not be so difficult to arrange something. All we need is a corpse, at the foot of a precipice; a safe distance from here, naturally, and not too far from the Mort de Gauthier. . . ."

Again he relapsed into thought, his eyes fixed on the floor.

But the Vicomte Antoine raised an objection.

"A corpse, yes! But we haven't one, Monsieur. Where can we get a corpse? Can you be thinking of breaking a grave, somewhere?"

The marquis came out of his revery, and laughed aloud.

"Antoine, there you are again—the inevitable touch of Gothic! Will you never get cured of your romanticism? What a thrill! A dark night! A cemetery! Three men stealing up to a vault with pick-axes. . . . The idea is not only romantic: it is asinine. Do you suppose the stupidest police sergeant, even, would stop at the first skull and cross bones he came to, and immediately draw up the death certificate of our friend, the captain, here? And that death certificate, precisely, we are looking for, are we not? For the world, for every living person in it, Monsieur le capitaine must be a dead man, and of a death as simple and as easily explainable as possible. Then only can we feel secure!"

His jocular mood vanished. He looked up at me again with deepest concern.

"Monsieur," he said, "I am profoundly sympathetic with you! I realize how hard it must seem to lose one's self—one's name, one's professional and social position, one's very individuality. That, alas, is the lot in store for you! You will be allowed to live—that I have promised, and I reiterate the promise now. But you will nevertheless have, in some cemetery, a grave with a stone and an epitaph upon it, and under the sod, a coffin with your mortal remains. There is no escape from that; and I beg you to be as resigned as possible!"

An icy chill ran the length of my spine. For death I had been long preparing; but I was beginning at last to see that dying was not what threatened me: it was a question of something else, of something worse, perhaps.

The Vicomte Antoine persisted in his objection.

"But those mortal remains, where are we . . ."

The marquis cut the sentence off with an oblique downward movement of his hand and arm:

"Here!" said he.

IN THE silence which followed, I could hear the violent leap of my heart and feel the drops of chilling sweat as they gathered about my temples. I was afraid, with that indescribable sensation of fear which one has of the dark, or of the ghosts and phantoms that walk by night. The falsetto of the marquis did little to allay my weird uneasiness when his voice again came to my ears. He was speaking to me.

"Monsieur le capitaine, I have been weighing the pros and cons in my mind carefully and thoroughly. But now my decision has been made. From it all our further deliberations must proceed. You, of course, can have no rational objection to it, since you could devise no means for solving the problem before us when your turn came. You will be so kind, accordingly, as to consider the present recourse settled beyond appeal."

He raised his right hand as though about to take an oath:

"Monsieur le capitaine, up to this day, you have been Monsieur André Narcy, captain of cavalry, staff officer at the fortress of Toulon. You are no longer such: Monsieur André Narcy, captain of cavalry, staff officer of the said fortress, is hereby suppressed, and nothing can save him, since his life has become a mortal menace to the Ever-living Man.

"You, Monsieur—henceforth I cannot call you Monsieur le capitaine—will continue to live under such name as shall be pleasing to you; but you shall continue to live here, a prisoner in this house—at least for a certain length of time, for it is by no means a life-long captivity that we are obliged to impose upon you. Our sojourn in this place may be shortened. Out of consideration for you, we will undertake to limit your restraint to a maximum of three years, dating from today.

"We will change our residence as soon as we may safely do so, without arousing unduly hazardous suspicions. We will take you with us. Then, on any spot on earth which you may designate—we require only that it be distant—we will set you at liberty, gladly, and without demanding any pledge of silence whatsoever from you. Why such a pledge, indeed? Your story, should you tell one, would be that of an unknown adventurer—or that of an impostor, should you have the extravagant audacity to attempt a resuscitation of Captain André Narcy. Thirty or forty months before this time on this 22nd of December, 1908, Captain André Narcy was found dead; and, unquestionably identified, was buried with military honors.

"Such a story, I repeat, and as you know well, would send you to an asylum for a much longer time than the three or four years we ask of you. No, you will be

silent without a pledge and silently begin life over again—a new life, which, I trust, will be happy, prosperous, and free from accidents, even from accidents less tragic than the one which has brought your present life to an end this very hour!"

I had listened, with a deathly chill in my heart. The marquis leaned forward toward me.

"Do you accept this recourse—of your own free will?" he asked.

I threw my shoulders back and mustered the little strength that still remained in me. With head high I answered:

"I am in your power. There is nothing for me to accept or to refuse. I have no choice in the matter."

To my surprise, my answer, easy as it must have been to foresee, strangely disconcerted my prosecutor. I saw him bite his lips, and look hesitatingly first to his right and then to his left. After a time, he resumed, abruptly, and said with a curious plaint in his voice:

"Monsieur, I am disappointed in you, and I confess to you quite frankly that this resignation you are affecting does not serve my purposes at all. Remember, if you will be so kind, exactly who we are. In my view, you and I do not stand toward each other in the position respectively of victim and executioner. And you have an absolutely free choice in agreeing or in refusing to submit to what we ask of you."

I was quite unable to fathom the meaning of this man who was addressing me in this incomprehensible language. I made no answer.

"Once more I ask you, Monsieur," he insisted: "Do you consent freely and heartily to the death of Captain André Narcy; and do you consent freely and heartily to survive him, at the simple cost of a few years of pleasurable captivity?"

I MADE no effort to understand, this time. I shrugged my shoulders and answered bluntly:

"No."

Once and again the marquis tossed his head.

"Monsieur, you are making a great mistake," said he: and his bright, restless eyes swept me with a glance of severe disapprobation. "A great mistake, Monsieur! I am a very very old man. May I plead indulgence for my years and employ toward you the language a grandfather might use toward one of his children's children? You are a stubborn bad-tempered boy—naughty, would be almost the word. You are rebelling petulantly against an inexorable destiny which, nevertheless, is deaf to the whimpering of men. Yes, it is childish of you; your conduct is not seemly in a grown man. I hope you cannot be imagining that a simple 'no' from you is going to cause us so very much embarrassment, or that we are going to commit suicide just because you refuse a real favor at our hands!

"Agreed: we will not kill you, whatever happens. But do not speculate too rashly on the horror of bloodshed which we so deeply feel. You have little to gain from it. You have been able to see from what I have told you how little, on the whole, we hesitate where women are concerned. Nothing would be easier than to sacrifice the so-called honor of the girl you love in exchange for the peace of mind of us three old men. No, nothing would be easier—as the count here explained to you, only a moment ago."

And at this point he too shrugged his shoulders. After a moment's pause, he resumed:

"What do you say, Monsieur? Shall we stop all this nonsense, and play the game with cards face up on the table? Look here: my idea, as I intimated, is to deceive the civil and military authorities of Toulon, and the newspapers and the public of Toulon, in regard to what has actually happened to you. They will, in other words, believe you dead. Your death certificate will be duly filed, your obituary written, your grave dug, and filled. In such a case, no one will ever dream of looking for you away off here in this lonely mansion, where you will continue to live, temporarily, the life that we are living—temporarily, I say; for as I promised a bare moment ago, you will be set at liberty again, and as soon as possible, in some distant country. What is there so terrible in all that for a man in your situation—unmarried, without dependents, without serious responsibilities of any kind?

"Now, for staging the first act of this trifling comedy, your coöperation is absolutely indispensable. This fictitious corpse they are to bury with military honors, honors worthily your due, Monsieur, why—I cannot produce it with the wave of a magic wand over a cucumber, as some fairy godmother might do in a Christmas tale; but I can produce it in a manner quite as satisfactory—only, to do so, I must have your help, a help which, I repeat, must be freely, spontaneously, proffered!"

I had listened I know not whether with

greater surprise or alarm. At his concluding words I saw the Count François and the Vicomte Antoine turn with one movement toward their respective parent and grandparent, their eyes aflame with a sudden intelligence as though some revelation which had not yet dawned on me had come to them. Once more I mustered all the forces of my faltering will; and I said:

"Why all this beating about the bush? You have the upper hand. Why so particular about the precise form of blackmail you will eventually resort to? I have already offered my life in ransom for the life of Madame de X . . . ? Do you want me to repeat that offer? Very well! I am still ready. Do your will upon me!"

Several times the Marquis Gaspard waved a broad wide-open hand from right to left, each gesture timed to an exclamation of protest.

"Tic tac too! Did ever you see a worse case of balkiness? Monsieur, for the dozenth time, and as you know perfectly well: nobody but you has raised the question of throat-cutting! No, it's a simple matter of what you call, with some generosity I must say, the good name of a woman; which good name is to be saved or sacrificed, as you chance to decide, and at a price of which you are thoroughly aware.

"However, I will concede a point: once this so-called good name has been saved, I will, if you think it in the least important, add the further stipulation that the object of your concern shall never again be invited to this place, that she shall henceforth and forever be excused from that special collaboration with us which, a few moments ago, seemed to arouse in you a very understandable compassion. What more can you ask, Monsieur? The question may now be stated thus: will you pay for madame, or shall madame pay for you?"

He had not completed the antithesis before I nodded in assent. The marquis rose: "I thank you," said he with great solemnity. "I have your word of honor. Between a man like you and a man like me that is quite enough."

Meanwhile the count and the vicomte had also risen to their feet.

"Gentlemen," said the marquis to them in a tone of command, "I noticed that you at last had understood me. Be so good, accordingly, as to attend to all the preparations necessary for the work that is now before us. No time must be lost, since the dawn is close at hand. For my part I must rest a moment, to collect myself."

He had stepped over, meanwhile, to one of the *dormeuses* of the complicated backs and arm rests, the curious design of which had attracted my attention when I first came into the room. He sat down, or rather, he buried himself, in one of these chairs. I saw him relax against the cushions, which seemed calculated to fit every projection and indentation of his form.

There he rested, with arms folded and eyes closed.

WHILE I waited, seated in my chair, looking on at everything intently, the Count François and the Vicomte Antoine silently applied themselves to a series of mysterious activities. First they took up each piece of furniture and moved it away from the center of the hall, standing the chairs in line against the wall, and leaving the whole floor clear as if in preparation for a ball. Next, and still without exchanging a syllable, evidently repeating an operation learned from long experience, they brought out the horse, or easel, of which I have spoken, and set it up, being careful to adjust it with precision to the longitudinal axis of the hall, at a point about a third way down the length thereof.

Next they opened the antique chest, and drew from it a curious object which they handled with great care, carrying it, with visible effort, to the foot of the horse on which they finally erected it in a vertical position. I noted that this object was about as large as an ordinary cart wheel, that it was flat and circular. A sort of lens, I judged it to be, much like the glass reflector of a powerful searchlight.

Its substance was not crystal, however, but a material which I could not identify, something translucent rather than transparent, colorless when viewed with even light, but otherwise showing brilliant metallic glints, shading from ruby red to emerald green with a profusion of all the tints of gold. This lustre, moreover, stood out against the colorless background, as if it came from matter distinct from the disk itself, though incorporated in the latter's substance. You are doubtless acquainted with Danzig brandy, a liquor which seems filled with particles of gloating gold; or with samples of Leyden ware showing bits of crumpled tinsel sprinkled through the glass. Such was the dish, or lens, in question.

Finally the two old men stepped cautiously up to their respective father and grandfather, still rigorously motionless in his strange *dormeuse*; and avoiding the slightest noise, they slowly, gently, wheeled

him towards a point on the floor which I noticed was marked off, with geometrical exactitude, by four plaques of glass—one apparently for each of the four legs of the chair.

Indeed, when they had pushed the old man to the square, the count and the vicomte kneeled on the floor to make sure that each castor was in the right position. From all their movements I could see that the operation they were about to perform was one requiring meticulous accuracy. This chair in place, they turned to the second *dormeuse*, which, though empty, was advanced just as carefully and noiselessly, and its position verified with just as thorough an examination.

Whereupon, the two old men returned to the seats they had previously occupied, now, however, sitting with their backs against the wall and their faces turned toward me. During all this time, I, for my part, had not stirred; nor had I been once disturbed or caused to change my position in the slightest.

I sat there, observing intently. Things were now arranged as follows in the room: the two *dormeuses* and the horse stood at three points on a straight line running lengthwise of the hall. The two seats faced each other, with the horse between them but nearer to one than to the other. Assuming the lens to be a reflection, I concluded from a rough computation of the angles, that the imagine passing through it from one chair would fall exactly into the other.

However, the Marquis Gaspard, his body still relaxed and his eyes closed, continued to give not a sign of life.

A long silence ensued.

A LONG, long silence. . . .

At first I struggled with all my soul to keep cool and indifferent, preserving on my features the mask of disdain which I had somehow imprinted there. But little by little I could feel that the hold I had on my nerves was growing steadily weaker. My Adventure was beginning to show a semi-supernatural aspect the very indefiniteness of which gradually paralyzed my courage as my motor centers had been paralyzed an hour or more before. So much so that eventually I grew alarmed lest my captors perceive the uncontrollable anxiety that was taking possession of me. I suddenly arose, and with the idea of hiding the expression on my face, I walked several steps away down the room.

Still without moving, asleep perhaps, the Marquis Gaspard seemed not to notice. Not so the Count Françoise nor the Vicomte Antoine, however. They, with a perfection of courtesy and with no trace of irony so far as I could see, inquired as to whether I were growing tired, or indeed impatient.

"Monsieur," the count spoke up solicitously, "be so kind as to excuse the slowness of all this. If I have accurately divined my father's idea, I assure you it is a very bold one, and care in preparation is a matter of unavoidable necessity. We have before us, unless I am quite mistaken, one of the most delicate operations magnetic science knows; and the Marquis Gaspard, with a proper caution, is summoning every particle of energy at his command. Believe me, Monsieur: he will need it all!"

I had stopped, and was looking at the man as he began speaking; but my eyes now turned instinctively toward the strange apparatus which he and his son had but recently put in position on the easel.

"That lens which you are examining," the Vicomte Antoine explained, "is used for concentrating the magnetic flow on the spot desired. It is made of a special compound invented by the Count de Saint Germain, and it has the power of refracting electrical waves just as glass refracts rays of light. By such inventions and after numberless unsuccessful experiments, the famous count, and my grandfather in his footsteps, were enabled to master the natural magnetism they possessed in their own bodies, and in consequence to obtain results which are rivalled by nothing that your alienists, your psychiatrists—that is what you call them, is it not?—nor even your wonder-working mediums, have ever dreamed of. You will soon be convinced, I warrant you. The operation that is probably to be tried tonight will furnish you with a prodigious demonstration!"

In spite of my ghastly desperation, I raised my eyebrows inquiringly. The vicomte shook his head, with a significant nod towards his grandfather.

"The marquis did not deem fit to discuss his project with us, nor even to reveal it in any precise detail to you. I should hardly regard myself as authorized to go into the matter more fully at present; but without divulging anything essential, I may ask whether you are familiar with a term from the jargon of the occult sciences—'exteriorization'? You must have witnessed, at one time or another, the evocation of a so-called spirit by a medium?"

The question seemed so utterly inane that I did not answer.

"I have, anyway," the vicomte continued, overlooking my silence. "I remember having seen something of the sort with my own eyes. Two fairly skillful performers, one of whom called himself a medium, were entertaining a number of people, myself among them, in a darkened room in Paris; and one day they actually succeeded in producing a luminous shadow of an approximately human form; and this, they claimed was the ghost of I forget what famous personage. That part of it was all a hoax, of course; though the shadow itself was not by any means. You could see it as plain as day, and almost touch it. There is no doubt in my mind that the practitioner in question was in possession of some processes which we are using all the time, and got this shadow from his colleague by a kind of 'exteriorization,' as they call it.

"This, to be sure, was all a very crude affair; but it does suggest some of the things we do in getting our life-workers to surrender a certain number of their cells or atoms to us; and it resembles more closely still the method we shall employ in a few moments. . . ."

He stopped, with an expression of mortification on his face; and the Count Françoise spoke up, as though to detract attention from his son's last words.

"Monsieur, it is hardly worth while to discuss that subject now, inasmuch as you will have full light upon it soon. I am going to seize this opportunity to congratulate you. Whatever you may be thinking of your experiences this night, it is really a piece of singular good fortune that has befallen you. Here you are an ordinary mortal, thrown by accident into the company of the Ever-living Men and forced, by an equally fortunate train of events, to share their lives for a certain length of time. Oh no, I beg of you—do not imagine I am bantering! Just consider! You people can count on less than a hundred years of life; and you are obliged, in consequence, to live in a perpetual hurry, thinking, talking, acting forever in a rush, bolting your daily bread, so to speak. Since you have to live rapidly in order to live at all, you never really know what living means, nor do you ever taste the infinite sweetness that life holds at bottom. Monsieur, the besetting thought that death is nearer by each moment must quite inhibit meditation and soil every leisure hour; and thoughtful idleness I regard as the one true delight, which far outstrips in consoling power the false and disappointing joys of sensuous indulgence.

"In enjoining on us to perpetuate not our youth but our maturer manhood, the Count de Saint Germain thought he was imposing on us a painful sacrifice that would, however, in the end prove well worth while. Over a long period of years, he himself had never tired of a most stormy voyage on the seas of human passion; and he ended in shipwreck on the shoals laid in his course by a tress of golden hair. I wonder if he ever realized that he was missing the haven of real happiness through fundamental misapprehension on his own part of the relative value of things?

"Now to judge by the interest you seem to show in a certain woman—a good-looking woman, I grant you, but noteworthy in no other way that I can see—you must still be ignorant of the fatuity of mental satisfactions, when these are compared with the joys that purely spiritual pleasures bring—through eyes, for example, that have learned to sense the simple yet sublime beauties of a sky reddened by the setting sun or of clouds touched with silver by a rising moon!"

The Vicomte Antoine raised an arm in a gesture of sanguine enthusiasm.

"The savor of such enjoyments never cloys, Monsieur; and while you are our guest, I hope to have the opportunity of revealing to you two wonders that Mortal Men have never learned to taste: Night, Monsieur, and Day. The age to which you belong has stubbornly and blindly limited its vision to the mechanical arts, seeking an absurd perfection of bodily comfort and well-being which is useless and contemptible once it has been attained. Your generation has quite lost sight of the gratifications that naturally come to life; and, losing these from view, it has of course lost the power to appreciate them.

"You, for instance, just a few hours ago, were walking with me out on the heath. It was raining and the night was menacing with storm. I am sure your mind was engrossed with the slippery muddy path, the cold wet bushes—all the discomforts, in short. Did you once raise your eyes to the romantic splendors with which we were surrounded—those frowning brows of the hills, their crests piercing the pearly mantle of mist and fog in aspiration toward that upper wrapping of transparent silver that Nature throws over her chilly shoulders? . . ."

I listened on in an amazement that for the moment quite mastered my anxiety. These atrocious demons, these vampires, cannibals indeed since they lived, after all, on human flesh and blood—how could they bring themselves to affect such delicate and poetic hypocrisies? And my thoughts went out to all the pitiable victims who entered that accursed House of the Secret, strong robust young men and women, and left it pale, fainting, emaciated invalids; all to the end that three beasts of prey might eschew "the false and disappointing joys of sensuous indulgence" for the higher ones that "purely spiritual pleasures bring."

THE Count François stopped and looked at his father who still sat, or lay, motionless as a corpse in that singular *dormeuse*, half chair, half couch. Had there appeared on those utterly blank features some expression which I had not perceived? The count, at any rate, turned at once toward me, and said:

"Monsieur, we are almost ready. Think again, I beg of you. Is there really nothing you would like before the operation begins? Is there anything we can do for you within the limits you now know? Our earnest wish is to satisfy your slightest desire, if possible; and we hope you will enable us to demonstrate our best good will!"

I was about to shake my head from right to left, in sign of refusal, when an idea flashed across my mind, setting my whole being afire with a sudden glow. I checked myself, my eyes fixed upon my interlocutor, one hand raised, my lips opening to form a word.

"Do not hesitate, Monsieur," the count encouraged.

"Gentlemen," said I, with decision, and sweeping all three of them with a rapid glance, "gentlemen, there is one favor you could do me, a favor which I trust you will have no difficulty in according, such immense store do I set upon it. Grant me this boon I ask, and I am ready to repay you not with my passive consent merely, but with my most active and sincere assistance in whatever you intend to do with me—be it even against my life. Look, gentlemen: some time ago you allowed me, did you not, to visit the room where my friend Madame de X . . . is in an hypnotic trance.

"My desire, my fervent prayer is to see her . . . once more . . . for one last time; but I must see her natural self, awake, that is, conscious, living, so that I may speak to her and hear her speak to me, that I may bid her farewell forever. An hour, yes, just one hour. Then . . . I shall be at your service, your man, your chattel, anything you wish, for as long a time as you wish."

I fell silent, crossing my arms upon my chest. Neither the count nor the vicomte replied for a moment; and I could see them consulting each other out of the corners of their eyes. Then, as they had so often done before, they turned toward their respective father and grandfather, and questioned him in silence. Again there was no change that I could see on that inert and expressionless countenance; and the old man's eyelids remained firmly closed. But the Count François must have seen something that I did not see; for he addressed me straightaway and without the shadow of incertitude.

"Monsieur," said he, "your wish shall be granted. We will do as you propose."

A thrill of undescribable emotion swept over me. The count meanwhile held his gaze intently fixed upon his father's face, interpreting to me the decision.

"Monsieur," he repeated, "we shall do as you propose. We shall have the honor of escorting you to the room where Madame de X . . . is sleeping. We shall leave you alone with her. As soon as we are gone, she, according to your request, will regain consciousness, and you will be free to converse with her on any subject without any restriction whatsoever.

"Do not be surprised, Monsieur. During your visit Madame de X . . . will be her material self, awake, conscious, living, as you have asked. She will know that you are there, and she will be glad to see you. But of course she will still have over her eyes the invisible blinder that we have placed upon them. She will not know where she is, and will not find it extraordinary to be meeting you in a strange room. Indeed it will not be strange to her. She will take it for her own or for yours. She will, in short, be unaware of everything which the vital interest of the Everliving Men requires her not to know.

"Supposing, for example, you were to spend your time and pains in trying to enlighten this beneficent unconsciousness of hers. You will not succeed, I warn you in advance, for, at the end of the sixtieth minute, Madame de X . . . will fall asleep again, as we have bargained, and will lose all memory of this talk with you, which memory will be erased from her mind, rendered absolutely null and nil forever . . . Monsieur, will you be so kind as to step this way? . . ."

He was already on the threshold, and, with the younger man leading, he crossed the same anteroom again. I followed close behind him. I am sure I staggered as I walked along.

Outside the badly jointed door, the familiar perfume that I loved came to my nostrils in warm subtle waves of fragrance. I thought I was fainting as I breathed it in.

"Monsieur," the Count François was now saying in a low voice, "Monsieur, for the duration of one hour, please consider this your house!"

SHE was still asleep, lost in that terrible slumber which, assuredly was more like death than like life. Her black eyelids, her livid lips, her ashen cheeks, her cold flesh, I scanned vehemently for some faint, deep-seated flush that would bespeak the coursing of a little blood, at least, through a few of her arteries. . . .

In vain! In vain!

An endless minute passed. I had bent forward over the bed to gaze upon her, not daring to stir the coverlets with the merest touch of my fingers. Finally, from her sunken chest the sound of stronger breathing seemed to come; and simultaneously on both her cheeks I could distinguish the pallid but reassuring blush I had waited for, so long, so ardently. . . .

What now took place was like a swift, miraculous resurrection. Her whole countenance regained its color gradually, her pulse beat more strongly. I could see the vital warmth again returning to her forehead and cheeks. She sighed inaudibly and her lips sketched a smile.

She said:

"Oh, I have been asleep! . . . And you were here, saucy boy!"

Her body—how light, how alarmingly light it was! She drew herself up languidly under the coverlets . . .

"Dearest, dearest love! . . . Oh, how tired I am! . . . It seems as though I could never again lift my head or stir a finger! . . . Never, never again! . . . But you love your poor little girl, don't you? . . . Look out, Monsieur! Perhaps your doll is broken! . . ."

As she sat up, I piled the pillows behind her. Her hair of greenish gold poured in a sparkling torrent down over her body. She laughed—that laugh of mischievous girlish gayety which I had always so much adored in her.

She said:

"Why, my hair is all down! I seem to have lost every comb, every pin to my name!" And she laughed aloud.

I listened with all my soul.

She drew up higher on the pillows, with an effort that brought the pallor to her face again. She cast a nervous glance about the room. I was afraid lest she perceive the bare walls, the grated window, the single wicker chair—afraid lest, perceiving them, she take fright at her strange surroundings, and kill the smile of trustfulness and confidence that lingered entrancingly on her lips. But no! The invisible blinder was securely fastened upon her eyes. She saw nothing unusual in that chamber which was our prison.

She asked simply:

"What time is it? Surely not yet seven o'clock?"

When I answered I too summoned a smile.

"It's early still, my silly, charming, little girl. . . ."

With a toss of her head, she shook from her face a few golden tresses that had strayed there—they shone with all the splendor of the sun—and sinking back deliciously upon the pillows, on which her light, her exceedingly light form left scarcely any imprint, she observed:

"I'm glad of that . . . I can stay in bed a moment longer . . . If I overslept, I might be late for dinner. . . . How tired I am!"

She did not move again, but lay there passively, happily.

She did not suspect in the least. And what an immense good fortune that she did not know! Why enlighten her, indeed? No! My despair, my terror, my mortal danger, that must all remain for me alone! And she would never, never know!

Since I was alone condemned, I alone would bear the horrors of my destiny. She, free, unkowing, redeemed, would be on her way back . . . toward life! I alone would stay behind, silently turning my footsteps toward . . . nonentity! . . . But for my silence I would be repaid with one supreme reward; the almost unbearable intoxication of this last meeting which would come to me pure, spotless, undisturbed, without a shadow of any kind upon it. . . .

SHE was becoming more and more wakeful, and now was chatting with a ripple of words, words of no import, that entered like little gleams of freedom into the darkness of our prison.

She said:

"Imagine, dearest! At my dressmaker's last Tuesday . . ."

And later on:

"You know very well whom I mean!

Marie Thérèse, the ugly thing! I saw her! She was making up to you under my very nose, at the Squadron Ball. . . ."

And again:

"The next time we go for a ride . . ."

And I thought. . . . What was I, indeed, but a corpse, listening from the depths of a grave to living beings conversing on the sod overhead . . . ?

Yes, a corpse. . . .

My gaze was fixed upon her bright sea-green eyes, and upon her delicate, gayly chirping lips; and within me was a scream of desperate anguish!

"You, you are my destroyer . . . you! You crossed my path, and I followed you; and you guided me, almost by the hand, to the yawning gateway of the tomb! Yes, that was true: a will-o'-the-wisp of the deadliest lineage, leading the luckless wayfarer blindly to destruction! And I succumbed! Everything is lost . . . for me! But now . . . can't you see, can't you feel, my agony? You are gay? You laugh? You chatter?

"Is it not written on my face, is it not written in my heart, that I am doomed, that I shall never, never more set eyes upon you? Yes, it is all written there—my love, my fate, my death! And if you fail to read, it is because you know not how to read; and if you know not how to read, it is because you do not love. Oh my dear lost love! Oh my fragile Goddess! You do not love me . . . so you will not miss me, overmuch. . . . You will find another man to love. . . . Youth will erase unhappy memories. . . . You will begin life anew . . . life anew! Better thus! Much better thus! I . . . I love you! I am saving you! I love you!"

And this last phrase I pronounced aloud, as though I were answering in those three words all that she had been saying to me:

"I love you . . . !"

She stopped, and looked at me in astonishment. Then she burst into a gay laugh.

"You love me? You love me? Thanks, Monsieur! If ever you dared say you didn't . . . !"

To punish me, she drew my head down teasingly, and pressed her lips to mine, in a kiss that lasted . . . that lasted, till I knew no more. . . .

When her clasp relaxed, I sat up again. She had sunk gently back upon the pillows.

Suddenly her eyelids quivered.

"Oh!" she said; "how that kiss fatigued me! Dearest, it cannot be seven o'clock? Won't you tell me that I needn't get up? I'm so tired! So tired! It can't possibly be sev—"

She collapsed suddenly upon the pillows, her eyes closed.

The door behind me opened.

"MONSIEUR," said the Marquis Gaspard to me, "it was a great pleasure to be able to allow you this hour you so much desired. I hope it came up fully to your expectations."

He was standing in the center of the large hall to which I had just returned—taller he seemed to me than formerly, with a carriage more erect and eyes agleam with a brighter, more imperious flame.

The candles along the wall had been put out; only the two lamps to the right and left of the fireplace were still lighted, and the Count François was busy lowering the wicks of these.

"Monsieur," the marquis continued, "will you not kindly take your place?"

He pointed to the deep chair in which he himself had been resting before I left the room.

I was anxious to betray no uneasiness whatever. I advanced without hesitation to the seat appointed and calmly sat down.

"Antoine!" the count called.

I was in that one of the two chairs which seemed nearest to the great lens. Facing me, and some ten or twelve paces away was the other seat, its arms opening toward me. It was empty. The stuffed cushions on the back of my chair, of the seat, arms and head-rest, seemed to accommodate my body perfectly; so that I was not conscious of any weight or fatigue at all. I stiffened nevertheless when I saw what the Vicomte Antoine was about to do. At his father's call, the younger man stepped forward in my direction carrying in his hand a sort of dark lantern, much larger than the one which had lighted our path over the mountains.

"Look out! Look out, Monsieur!" he called, noticing that I had fixed my eyes in some alarm upon him. "Turn your head the other way, or you may be blinded."

He slipped the shutter over the spotlight aside. I was bathed from head to foot in a harsh raw light which was all the more painful from the relative darkness of the rest of the room. I closed my eyes at first. When I opened them again, I avoided the stream of radiance that was turned upon me, and looked past it to one side, toward the lens and the empty chair beyond the latter.

Despite my efforts to control myself, I trembled, stupidly trembled, at what I saw. The chair was no longer empty; someone,

or rather, something, was occupying it—the luminous shadow of a man seated, a shadow of myself, in fact. Of this I furnished proof at once by raising my arm, a movement which the shadow repeated with absolute fidelity.

Now I understood; the hypothesis I had formed when the lens was first brought out was the correct one; the second chair was fixed on the spot where the image of the other chair, passing through the lens, would fall. The moment a vivid light was thrown upon me in that darkened room, my image became visible over there. There was nothing so mysterious in all that so far. I was somewhat ashamed of my first quiver of fright.

After a second or so, the vicomte closed his lantern again, and the image disappeared. Then only did I remember something very strange, which at first had not occurred to me. If the apparatus nearby were an ordinary lens, my image, as I had just observed it, should have been upside down, my feet above my head. Now such was not the case. It was right side up, a thing which I could not account for then, and have not been able to account for since.

Meanwhile, there had been a question, delivered in the shrill falsetto of the marquis:

"Is the image clear?"

The vicomte's low-pitched voice responded:

"Perfectly, Monsieur!"

I had let my head fall back against the prop behind it; and it half buried itself in the upholstery, which sustained its weight so evenly and firmly that I am sure I could have fainted and yet still have kept to the same position without bending my neck. The field of my vision was proportionately reduced, however. I could see no one now except the Count François, who was still watching his lamps, turning them by this time so low that a faint blue flicker only was visible around the wicks.

The marquis asked another question, and this time of me:

"Monsieur, you are well seated in your chair, quite comfortable, quite relaxed? It is very important that you should be, I caution you!"

I tested the springs and mattressing.

"I think I am all right," I answered briefly.

As I replied, I touched my fingers to the covering of the *dormeuse* about me. It was not satin, nor velvet, as I had supposed; but a kind of silk so closely woven that I guessed it to be for purposes of insulation. Leaning over I now noticed also for the first time that the four legs of my chair were shod with glass.

When I sat up again I saw the Marquis Gaspard standing in front of me.

"Monsieur," said he, with the very greatest gentleness in his manner and tone of voice, "Monsieur, the dawn will soon be upon us. We can delay no longer now. You are quite sure you have no objection to our beginning?"

One last wave of anguished rebellion gathered in my throat, and choked me. Nevertheless, I shook my head impatiently, to indicate that I had no objection whatever.

"That is better than I dared hope," the marquis exclaimed; "I cannot tell how grateful to you I am!"

He was looking at me with an emotion that quite surprised me. Visibly affected, and with some hesitation, he resumed:

"Monsieur, there is one thought which I cannot bear your having even for a single moment: the thought that you have fallen, this night, into the hands of heartless, inhuman men."

I stared at him coldly without answering.

"The operation I am about to try on you," he resumed, "is something absolutely new. I advise you with the utmost frankness that it is a very dangerous one, though it is not, unfortunately, in my power to avoid it. The best I can guarantee is that you will not suffer much pain. To add just one more chance that the issue will be favorable, I have decided not to put you to sleep; though the experiment conducted under such conditions will cost me a far greater effort, and much more physical suffering. But if you are awake, with your nerves and muscles at normal tension, you will be better able to withstand the loss of substance you must undergo."

He inclined his head to one side, his cheeks resting on three of his fingers.

"I wonder . . ." said he, in a voice somewhat changed in tone.

"I was just thinking," he began again. "Without any doubt you have papers on your person addressed to you under your name, your former name, that is. . . . Yes! And a pocket book perhaps? . . . Exactly. . . . Would you be so very, very kind as to entrust them all to me? . . . They might interfere with our results. . . ."

Without comment, I unbuttoned my coat and thrust a hand into my inside pocket. I found there my card case, with a number

of visiting cards, my road maps, two or three blank envelopes, and finally, crumpled through my haste in putting it away, the letter—the letter of the colonel of artillery. I handed them all to the marquis.

"I thank you!" said he.

The fold of his thin mouth grew deeper, and his tone was now one of great solemnity.

"Monsieur," said he, "everything is ready now. My last request is that you be kind enough, in view of the fact that you will retain your consciousness, to relax completely, not only every sinew of your body but every tension of mind and will. Try to play 'dead,' if I may say such a thing. Play you are sound asleep. Notice, Monsieur, that I attach great importance to these suggestions, which, you can rely upon it, are made in the best interests of us both."

I acquiesced with a slight arching of my brow.

He saluted me with his most correct and formal bow.

"That is all, Monsieur," said he; "farewell!"

CHAPTER V

HE HAD disappeared.

But a moment later I was conscious of his presence close behind me. I knew that he was standing there, his eyes fixed upon me; for between my neck and shoulders I could feel a weight, an impact, like the one I had experienced when the Vicomte Antoine found me lying on the heath, and the one with which the Count François welcomed me on my entrance into the House of the Secret. . . .

Like these, I say . . . but no! The present pressure was something incomparably heavier and more forceful—a veritable succession of hammer blows descending upon me with a violence that left me bruised and dazed.

Then suddenly . . . everything began to go round and round—an overpowering dizziness assailed me. The lens of the golden sparkles, the armchair opposite me, the clock in the corner, the antique chest against the wall, all seemed to be caught up in a cyclonic whirl of which I was the tottering, collapsing center.

In spite of the downy prop behind my head and the cushions that contained me all around, I seemed to be falling, falling, or soaring, soaring; and my frenzied fingers clutched the arms of my chair, which, to my sense, now plunged into bottomless depths, now darted upwards to impossible heights, rocking frightfully meanwhile and even turning completely over and around. A measureless void was all about me, and my single intelligent thought was one of surprise that I was not hurtling into this gulf of nothingness.

An atrocious torture, but a short one! A deadening stupor came over me progressively, first relieving and finally overcoming my dizziness. My sensation now was one of extreme fatigue, more exhausting than any I had ever before experienced. My head especially seemed emptied of all its cerebral substance as a result of the first shocks I had received; and it lay helpless, lifeless, in its hollow formed in the upholstery. A whimsical interest in what time it might possibly be came to obsess me. I remember that I could hardly move my eyes when I tried to turn them toward the clock; and if I did succeed eventually in focussing them on that point, I could not read the clock's hands, so dark and murky had my eyeballs become, so insensitive my retina.

A curious tingling began at the ends of my fingers and toes, and spread upwards into my hands and arms, and into my feet and legs. It was like the beginning of a cramp.

But the cramp did not come. What I felt rather was a kind of chill. But neither was this a clearly defined sensation, so rapid, so confused, were the changes and variations in my impressions. It was, on the whole, as though my body were disintegrating little by little, being torn apart, filling meanwhile with a strange liquid, lighter than blood, in which all my organs, freed from their muscles and tendons, seemed to be afloat and drifting.

The conviction came over me that I was about to die. . . .

* * *

It were better not to resume my story!

My pencil has been lying idle for a long time. Here on this marble slab is the black-bordered register. I hesitate . . . I cast my eyes around. . . .

The noon-day sun is gilding the tips of the cypress trees, while through their stiffened branches the winter wind is playing fitfully. Not a cloud is visible in that cold blue sky. Despite the torpor that besets the arid marrow of my bones, I feel almost a thrill of joy at the splendor of this last day of mine. . . .

Yes, it were better to stop my story here!

Why write on? No one will believe me! Indeed I myself almost doubt the reality

of this fabulous, this impossible, this incredible experience! If I were not here in this place, if I could not read the fateful, irrevocable epitaph graven on this stone on which my elbows rest—if I could not run my palsied fingers through this long snow-white beard—no, I would not believe, I would not believe! I would say rather that I were dreaming, that I were raving in some ghastly mad obsession.

But the proof, the proof is there. I cannot hold my peace! I must finish the narrative I have begun. All men, all women—my brothers and sisters—are in danger! I must save them!

O you who read this my confession, this my last will and testament—for the love of your God, if you have one, do not doubt me! But read, understand, believe!

* * *

Yes, I thought I was about to die.

The strange tingling, now the only sensation which I could isolate with any distinctness, was running through my whole body, from the tips of my toes to the tips of my hair. It was no longer like the first symptoms of a cramp, as it had been at the beginning. No, it was something more regular in beat, more enthralling in power. It caused my mind to revert to Madeleine and the morning rides we used to take together; to our picnics in the forest clearings, to a fondness she had for burying her naked arms in the ground so that I could compare the feeling of the smooth warm sand with that of her smooth warm skin. Through my half-opened fingers I would strain the minute grains and as they fell they made a faint continuous sound.

Such a sound I was hearing now; but it came not from between my fingers, but from under my skin, from inside my flesh—the murmur of an invisible sand which my veins and nerves were sweeping along their channels in a full, regular, unbroken flow, from my heart and my other internal organs toward my hands and toward my feet. This strange flood became a rushing torrent about my wrists and ankles, and around the joints of my fingers—narrow passages which confined, condensed, cramped the current. But it went beyond! How far I could not say. I know simply that my fingers and toes were at once moist and chilled, like vessels of unglazed pottery which give off water drop by drop and become ice-cold from evaporation....

And all the time, on the back of my head and between my shoulders, I could feel blow after blow in furious succession, blows which I know came from the all-powerful eyes of the old marquis, who stood there relentlessly raining them upon me.

I grew weaker still. A few moments before I had tried vainly to look at the clock against the wall. Now even my eyelids were paralyzed. I could not close my eyes nor could I turn them. They were glued inexorably upon the objects directly in front of them—the translucent lens (the golden glints in its substance glowing now mysteriously); the armchair where, for a second, I had glimpsed the seated image of myself; beyond, a bit of white-washed wall—all blending in a blurred whirling confusion.

As second followed on second I thought I could feel more and more of my life flowing silently out of my wasting body....

Then suddenly, something extraordinary occurred; and I was so shocked by it that I managed, calling on I know not what reserves of energy, to open my eyes a little wider and to clear their vision by winking my eyelids several times.

In the chair where I had before seen my own image seated, now I could see, clearly, distinctly, beyond any possible doubt whatever, beyond any chance of its being an hallucination—I could see with an unspeakable overwhelming certitude—another image, likewise seated, another image also made of light, but of a different kind of light—a sort of fluctuating phosphorescent shadow which was gradually taking form . . . out of nothing. . . .

AT FIRST it could hardly be said to exist at all . . . something more tenuous than a shadow . . . as transparent as glass . . . all the particulars of the chair visible through it—covering, head-rest, arms and back . . . something formless, colorless . . . a sort of pallid luminousness hazy in outline, changing in texture, suggesting the vague fluorescence in a Gessler tube. . . .

Yet something, nevertheless, something more certainly real than the image I had seen shortly before—the image of myself refracted through the lens . . . something material, tangible, ponderable . . . as I could sense, as I could feel, as I knew with a conviction that excluded all doubt . . . something living, perhaps!

Living, certainly! Yes, something alive; for now, inside the tissue, inside the substance of this luminous something, I thought I could see . . . I could see . . . I could see with absolute distinctness . . . a sort of web, a veritable network of veins and nerves . . . outlined in light . . . in

light brighter than the light of the thing itself . . . and along those nerves and through those veins, rushing, streaming, leaping in regular pulsations, a phosphorescent liquid . . . all coming from one center . . . and that center . . . a heart!

I could see . . . but the testimony of my eyes was nothing . . . my senses, my feelings, my very consciousness . . . told me, convinced me, assured me, that that shadow was alive. . . . Of its life I had the same perception that I had of my own life. I could feel the beating of that heart, as I could feel the streaming of that phosphorescent blood in those arteries of light as I could feel my own red blood in my own arteries of flesh. . . . Then at last I knew. . . .

I knew that that Something, that that Presence, that that Being was taking form, not from nothing, but from me. Not only was it from me; it was my very very Self.

From the depths of my weakness and of my agony, from the abyss of mortal terror in which my consciousness and my intelligence had been engulfed, that one persuasion rose—a clear, clear comprehension of all that had been explained, suggested, threatened in words that had hitherto seemed so obscure to me. . . .

Yes, that Shadow there was I, that Shadow sitting in the chair before me, that Shadow of pallid light that was already losing its transparency! . . .

* * *

I lost my hold on the wisp of sentience to which I had been clinging. Weakness overcame me. Sight faded from my eyes, and hearing from my ears. A black opaque veil descended over me, enshrouding me, burying me. I became as one dying, dying . . . dead.

* * *

Later, I know not how much later, but after, I think, a long, long time, I came to myself again.

And when I came to myself again, all the life that I had lived before I sank into that deathly slumber, seemed to have receded into a past infinitely, eternally remote, a past more ancient than all the ages.

A pair of cold hands was pressing on my temples. I could feel drops of water trickling down my face. They came from a wet handkerchief that had been drawn tight across my brow. I knew that the Count Francois was standing in front of me, and that he was working to bring me back to consciousness.

A sigh forced its way through my lips. My eyes opened. I stretched my fingers that had gripped the two arms of my chair. . . .

The count removed his hands from my temples.

He wiped my forehead dry.

He went away.

Then I saw. . . .

I saw, in the chair opposite me, seated, a Man.

A Man like me, exactly like me, like me to the last detail: myself.

I looked at him, and I was not sure whether he or I were I. And I was not sure whether we were two men, or one man in two persons. I raised—how painfully!—an arm; and I succeeded in raising it because now it had become as light as gauze. I raised an arm, I say, to see whether the other Man, the other I, would be forced, by what I did, to do the same, to raise an arm that is, the arm that I raised. But no! I moved: and he did not. So then . . . there were two of us: I and a Man: two different men, separate, distinct Beings.

Distinct, separate, and yet, unquestionably, two parts of one whole, a single whole; and all my flesh, all my wasted rarefied substance cried out desiringly toward that other flesh, that other substance that had been torn from me, "exteriorized" from me.

Another Man: a Man, and not a shadow, and not a ghost! No spectral trappings; no sheets, no shrouds! Clothes! A riding suit, exactly like my riding suit. I looked at the clothes I was wearing. I had just bought them new. Now they were old, worn out, threadbare. . . . As old, as worn, as threadbare as I myself!

Alas! Alas! Why, why am I writing still? I know that you who read will not believe. . . . But I tell you I am not insane! Would a madman talk as I talk? Another thing: I am about to die: and a man does not cross the threshold of Eternity with falsehood on his lips. . . . Two good reasons for not doubting my veracity. . . .

Alas! Alas! I know . . . I know . . . why should I go on. . . .?

Nevertheless. . . .

THE Man got up from his chair and walked toward the door.

I saw that He walked with my walk. When He arose, I had felt in the muscles of my hips and back, a sudden stiffening

as though I too were making an effort to rise from my chair. Each of his strides thereafter caused rapid contractions of the muscles in my thighs, in the calves of my legs, at my ankles.

He stopped at the door into the anteroom, and stood there with his hand on the latch.

And I heard the voice of the Marquis Gaspard speaking, a voice I could scarcely recognize, so faint, so broken, so husky had it become—a breathing rather than a voice.

It said:

"The papers!"

The towering figure of the Vicomte Antoine came between the Man and me. Nevertheless I could see, I know not how, that into the Man's pocket the vicomte was slipping my purse and the letter from the colonel of artillery.

"He has them," the vicomte said.

The Man opened the door and went away.

* * *

Now I say that when He was in the antechamber, separated from me by a thick partition, I could see Him still . . . not exactly through the partition; nor could I, exactly, see Him with my own eyes . . . but, as it were, with another pair of eyes which went along with Him, and did not leave Him any more than my eyes left me. . . . With these latter eyes I could see Him more clearly, more distinctly than with my own eyes.

And when He had left the antechamber, and was out there in the garden, under the trees of the thickly matted branches, I could see Him still. And when He had left the garden and was out there on the heath—there where the plants and trees grew sparse and stunted . . . I could see Him still. . . .

Once more, for one last time, the falsetto of the Marquis Gaspard grated on my ears; and I sensed that he was mustering all the fainting sonorousness of his throat and lungs for a last irrevocable declaration.

"Monsieur," I heard him say, "Monsieur, that Man you saw, that Man who has just departed . . . be my witness that I created Him . . . as God created me. And having created Him I have the same right to destroy Him that God had to destroy me . . . if He is able!"

The voice died out. . . .

And I could see Him still. . . .

He was walking rapidly, slipping through the underbrush with surprising ease. And I thought of Madeleine, whom I had seen six hours . . . six centuries? . . . before . . . gliding in that same way over the same rough ground.

The dawn was streaking the eastern sky; but the valleys behind the screen of mountains were still sunk in darkness. Nevertheless I could see Him still. . . . Though to see Him was like touching Him. Those supernatural moving eyes with which I was following Him step by step, those miraculous eyes attached to his flesh doubtless because his flesh was my flesh . . . those infallible eyes which made me see with absolute distinctness . . . were like two hands . . . feeling rather than seeing.

The Man was getting farther and farther away, walking very rapidly now. Around Him I could dimly see the enormous blocks of stone with the smooth hewn faces, those monoliths of geometrical design, rising naked from the soil, which had astonished me on my own passage through them. In that labyrinth the Man did not hesitate at all, but hurried on his way with the same certainty as before. . . .

Around my ankles now I could feel the scratching of the juniper and the briar . . . as though it were I and not He whom the thorns were tearing. . . . And as He kept walking, I grew fatigued, more and more fatigued, till a sharp pain caught me in the joints of my hips and knees. . . .

The Man was beyond the labyrinth of stones, advancing along the deep ravines and precipices which also I recognized from having followed the same path six hours before. Not far from there, indeed, the spotlight of my guide had lighted the faint trail, his cane beating to right and left to open the way before me. Those very brambles that were now scratching the Man's legs and my legs. . . .

* * *

My cries of "Mercy!" Mercy!" had worn me out. . . .

* * *

The Man stopped suddenly.

The glow of sunrise had now climbed to the zenith. The whole landscape was bathed in a pale but brightening light. A clump of tall ferns appeared, masking the precipitous wall of a ravine.

The Man stopped, folded his arms, and leaned forward. I leaned forward with Him.

A precipice was there, the precipice on the brink of which I had earlier been moved to terror. I recognized it, as I had recognized the labyrinth of monoliths, the region of ravines and precipices, the thickets of juniper and briar. I recognized the same smooth wall of the chasm, the same white stones of the river bed over which the deep black water was rushing in a torrent. . . . And I recognized the same nauseating chill of vertigo.

In the strip of bright sky along the eastern horizon, a first splash of red, the color of blood, marked the oncoming of the sun. . . .

I was striving to master that nausea, that vertigo, when an atrocious snap of all my muscles hurled me violently from my chair, hurled me into the air as a diver is tossed from a spring-board. Weak as I was, exhausted, prostrate, my muscles contracted with such desperate violence that I was thrown up up through the air, to fall two, three, four yards from my chair, which was thrown over backwards by the push I gave it.

I fell . . . I fell . . . my head and arms thrown forward . . . and I lost consciousness again.

I lost consciousness again; but not before I had had time to see the Man likewise hurled headforemost into the abyss, where He fell, and fell, and fell, to be dashed to death on the white boulders under the black rushing water. . . .

THEREAFTER . . . I know not what . . . I knew nothing more. . . .

Morning . . . morning, and raining still. Through the grated window of my bedroom-prison, a sticky viscous light was making its way. I was lying on the bed. When I awakened, I tried to rise on my elbow to look around me. I could not: I had not the strength.

But suddenly I could see . . . I could see, in another place. . . .

Rushing water . . . tall green reeds . . . moss . . . a lofty, vertical wall of rock . . . white cobblestones washed by a tumbling stream . . . and, on the jagged point of a boulder, a corpse, my corpse, me. . . .

I could see that my clothing was soaked, the water covering my breast and shoulders, and filling my wide opened eyes. . . . But I did not feel the cold liquid contact of the stream, nor the chilling north wind, laden with rain, that was beating upon my back and legs which were out of water on the narrow bank of the torrent there. I could feel nothing. I was dead. I mean to say that the Man was dead, the Man who was, and still is, I. I could see a large red hole in the back of his head—the wound made by the rock He struck, the wound through which his life had spurted away. . . . The back of my head . . . of me who was lying there on that bed in that chamber . . . pained me terribly.

* * *

So I lay there, inert. Several times I tried to move. Move I could not; nor was there anything I could do. Through the half-opened window the resinous fragrance of rain-soaked fir-trees came. For a moment, they entered the room—the Count Francois and the Vicomte Antoine, I mean. They examined me, felt my pulse, my legs and arms, the back of my head. But soon they went out again. I was left alone.

* * *

All that I have just been telling even then belonged to the distant past, a past fabulously remote.

I was lying on the bed, inert, watching my dead body awash in the stream. I tried to remember what had happened. . . .

Yes . . . I fell . . . I was bending over the edge to peer into the depths of the chasm . . . and a heavy blow struck me between the shoulders . . . one of those blows such as I had several times received between the shoulders . . . and on the back of my head . . . blows from the overwhelming gaze of those old men . . . of the old marquis . . . which had pounded me to pulp.

So then, I was watching the dead body . . . my dead body. . . . Carrion already old! Flies swarming on and over it. The torrent foaming around and against it—and running water erodes, dissolves, disintegrates! . . . Yes, carrion indeed! . . . The coffin maker must come soon, or little will be left for him! . . .

* * *

Carrion already old!

But not so old as my living body—that too was old, limitlessly aged!

Was I as old as this, a little while before? Or had the sun merely stopped in the heavens?

And if so, how long? For many, many years? I could not say. . . .

* * *

I remember, yes . . . I fainted . . . I lost consciousness completely. When I fell over the cliff . . . my head and my hands struck hard on the tiled floor . . . the Ever-living Men probably brought me to the room and put me on that bed. . . . Perhaps the rushing water of the stream, or the rain, or the winter wind turned me so old. . . . One cannot help but change . . . lying out in the weather! . . .

Old! old, old! And older, older, every minute, every second!

My hand went to my chin. . . . A beard was beginning to appear there. . . . It was growing rapidly . . . a gray beard. . . . As I passed a hand over my temples, I could feel deep wrinkles there.

Three times the door of my chamber opened partly, and I could see the faces of the Everliving Men peering in at me attentively. On each occasion I feigned sleep, closing my eyes. . . . But not entirely. . . . My eyelids were far enough apart for me to spy on what they did. . . . They did nothing. . . . But this I saw . . . I saw that they were astounded . . . plainly, evidently astounded at the age, the sudden age that had come over me. . . .

* * *

I lay there inert. . . .

What time was it, I wondered. What day of the week?

What month of the year? And the year—was it of the era of our Lord?

My beard was gray at first. Now it had whitened. It had grown broad and long. . . . Thus do beards and hair grow on the bodies of the dead, I thought. The flesh seemed to have left my hands. Through the dry darkened skin that covered them I could feel brittle knotted bones. . . .

Ho! Ho-ho! What was that? Torches in my chamber! And voices shouting! Ah no! Not in my chamber . . . down there, along the stream . . . up on the cliffs, above the chasm. . . . Down there, of course! What could I have been thinking of?

Torches on the brink of the abyss. . . . Faces peering into the black void. . . . Uniforms! Red trousers, blue coats. . . . And a stretcher. . . . A good idea! A good idea! . . . Of course! Of course! For me, for me!

Voices calling. An oath or two. A voice louder than the others bidding these be silent. I heard everything distinctly. Yes, every word.

"But I see him, I tell you! Look, there he is! Down in that hole! Gotta get down there someway!"

"Watch your step, boy! What a hole!"

"What the hell! I done worse places than this before. . . . The Devil roast my soul! Stinks a bit, this fellow! Whew!"

"Aw go on, what are you giving us!"

"But I say, Sergeant, he's rotten!"

"Damn it, man . . . what have you found? Somebody else? Take a squint at him. . . . We've got to get the right man! What's he got in his pockets?"

"Sticky damn mess! Whew! But here we are! Our man, all right! Yes! Identification card! Other stuff with his name on it! And here's his revolver! Our man, Sergeant, no doubt of that. How about that rag! Sending it down?"

"When you get him ready, you give the word and we'll haul up!"

"Righto! One, two, three, and you pull! . . . Well, I'll be damned!"

"What's worrying you now?"

"Why this here corpse! Weighs about an ounce and a half!"

* * *

I lay there inert. . . .

I could feel the pressure and the scrape of the canvas on my head, and legs and arms. . . . The litter went along jostling me . . . I could see everything, clearly . . . the flickering of the torches there, and the gleaming of the candles at the points of the three crossed lances. . . .

Total darkness outside! . . . Not a ray of light coming through the grated window. Not one last trace of twilight on the mountain trail. . . .

The canvas tightened, and closed my eyes. There on the heath a shroud of canvas! There in my room a shroud of slumber! Sleep! Another death! . . .

DAWN again. . . . I cannot see the new morning light; but I am conscious of its approach. The grated window is still dark; but I am sure the night is ending. Through the thick panes of glass, I feel a chill, the harbinger of day.

* * *

Sleep seems to have done me good, giving me back some strength, however little.

"Could I sit up now, if I tried?"

How long have I been here? Let's figure it out, from the beginning, from the beginning of my Adventure! Or rather, no . . .

let's go backward from today. . . . Today, yes . . . sunrise . . . there was a sunrise yesterday . . . cold and rainy. That's one day . . . the day when I grew old so fast . . . I got this way yesterday, between dawn and twilight! . . . The night before that, night before last . . . I came to this House, the House of the Secret. . . . Last night, and night before last. Yesterday between. . . . Two nights and one day, in all. . . .

One single day . . . yet how deep these wrinkles, how withered the skin on this aged face of mine! And these bristles on my face . . . on my cheeks and chin . . . bristles white as snow, white as hoar-frost! One day for them to grow . . . just one day . . . but a day that lies heavier than a century upon my soul! Who will ever believe me when I tell this story? No one! No one!

Could I sit up, if I tried? But first, I must get rid of this sheet that's tied around me. . . . Trusses me all up, and I can't move. . . . The sheet. Where's the sheet? Here's a sheet; but it doesn't seem to be troubling me. . . . Where's the . . . ah, yes . . . it's the sheet on Him—on the Man, I mean. . . . They have swathed Him in a sheet. . . . I can still see. . . . I see. . . . So naturally . . . natural, isn't it? . . . I get things mixed a little. . . .

* * *

I did not hear the door open . . . I was caught by surprise. I had no time to close my eyes.

There they are again, the two of them, the Count Francois and the Vicomte Antoine. They are looking at me. . . . And I can easily see, see as easily as yesterday. . . . I can see they don't know what to make of it . . . don't know what to make of me, that is.

"Monsieur, be so good as to get up, I beg of you." It was the Count Francois who spoke.

And I arose, without the slightest difficulty. I was weak, very weak indeed, but light, ever so light . . . as light as the air about me. . . .

The County Francois spoke again:

"Monsieur, my father is very tired today; he is in no condition to leave his room. For that reason my son and I have come to ask you to go with us to him."

I followed them. . . . What difference did it make to me whether I was in one place or in another?

The old man, the Marquis Gaspard, I did not see. . . . A portière of antique silk was standing in front of his bed, there in his chamber. Of the bed I could see the four columns of carved wood which supported the canopy. It was a square bed, without curtains. . . . That was all I saw. . . .

But I recognized the queer falsetto of the marquis, and the marvelously gentle and persuasive tone his voice could assume, when it was not hardened with wilfulness or soured with irony.

THE Living Man began to speak. I stood in the doorway listening. . . . And as I listened, this worn-out memory of mine, a memory so wasted, so decayed that one by one all my recollections of the good old days have fallen away as dust from it, took in his every word so deeply, so burningly, that I shall remember all he said till my course is wholly run.

He began to speak. He said:

"Monsieur, I had greater hopes of my own magnetic resources and of your powers of resistance. I cannot say I regret having done what I did. . . . I did my duty. . . . Our security, our peace of mind, our probable immortality could be conserved in no other way. Those at any rate are now adequately safe-guarded, at the price simply of a somewhat greater effort. But I should be much better satisfied had the experiment cost you a fatigue as great as mine, without drawing so deeply on your vital reserves. To be sure, I warned you that what we were about to do might prove extremely dangerous. I feared for your life especially when the moment would necessarily come for breaking the magnetic bond that connected you with the Being I derived from your substance.

"I foresaw also a great and cruel suffering on your part when I should kill, as I was obliged to kill, this newly created Being. Now those two shocks you withstood marvelously, Monsieur; but only to fall quite unexpectedly for us, into a particular state of languor and exhaustion in which I see you now. Monsieur, I am immensely, immensely sorry; and I trust you will understand that, had it been within my power, I would have been only too glad to leave you in a much stronger and sturdier state of health!"

A pause . . . I drew back a step, with the idea of returning to my room. But the voice began again, in a slower and more solemn tone.

"Monsieur, since things are as they are, the simplest course for you is to bow to

the inevitable. But I venture to point out that the present situation, bad as it is, is not without its advantage for you. The objections we were obliged to put forward originally to your immediate release obtain no longer. A favor we could not think of granting to the man you were yesterday at this hour—a man robust of body and vigorous of will, we are only too happy to accord to the man you are today—an aged invalid, broken in body and weak from more weaknesses than one. . . .

"Monsieur, you are, from this moment, free, a freedom without any qualifications or restrictions whatsoever. As soon as you choose to say so, my grandson will have the honor of showing you to our door. You may go anywhere you wish. We ask only that you refrain from mentioning to any living soul the things that you have seen during your stay in this House. I am sure you will decide to say nothing of them."

Still I stood there listening. Somehow I was not at all surprised at this offer of my freedom however unexpected. I stood there listening; and I could feel the words I had heard sinking deeply into me, eating their way into the substance of my brain to remain there with indelible fixity. . . . I stood there listening. . . .

Ah yes! I understand, I understand! From what I have been through, my will, my intelligence, my reason, have all been rarefied, depleted. My head is half emptied, as it were; and these sentences that are being addressed to me, these orders that are being given me, this password of silence that is being graven eternally upon my memory, all dictated by another will, another intelligence, another reason, are to be substituted in my brain by what is no longer there, for what has been taken away, and made to fill the intolerable hollowness of my skull! . . .

The falsetto voice concluded:

"For the rest you have our promise . . . Madame de X . . . the girl you love, left our abode last night. . . . She will never again be recalled to us. . . ."

Madame de X. . . ? The girl I love? . . . I love? Ah yes, yes, yes! I had forgotten. You see, I'm an old old man and my heart is empty too . . . sucked dry, impoverished! I'm an old man! Many things have changed in me. . . . Madame de X? . . . Ah yes! . . . Madeleine! Madeleine will never be recalled! Yes, of course. She will never come back here again. . . . As we agreed.

The falsetto voice fell silent with two words:

"Farewell, Monsieur!"

All was finished!

* * *

At the door, the outer door, of the heavy oaken panels studded with iron nails, and which had just been opened . . . on the highest of the eight steps leading down from it . . . the Count François and the Vicomte Antoine likewise said to me:

"Farewell, Monsieur."

* * *

I crossed the garden my feet treading and crushing the tall unmown grass, my head grazing the thick matted branches of the pine and cedar trees.

The gate was open.

I hurried through it.

And now I was out upon the heath, walking indifferent to direction save that I turned my face toward the brightening dawn. . . .

I WALKED all day long, from the blue twilight of morning to the red glow of afternoon, following a route which I am sure I could not find again. I know simply that it was always straight ahead. And I felt no fatigue until after I arrived.

That was late, very late in the afternoon. Straight ahead I walked continuously, not knowing whither I was bound, with no idea that I was going anywhere. Then suddenly I noticed that I was on a broad highway, and in front of me to left and right some houses came into view.

Beyond them, a bridge, a drawbridge. I recognized Toulon, Toulon and its ramparts.

Through the arching gate the sun shone red as blood.

Yes, it would soon be evening! A sudden weariness came over me, and my feet began to lag on the rusty road. But I went on, on, on, not knowing or caring whither, just going on . . . as iron goes toward the magnet. . . .

The town finally!

On my right a shop!

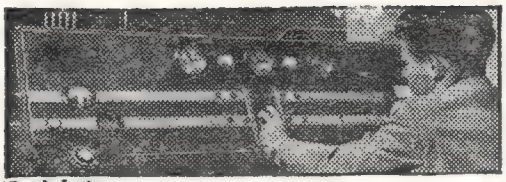
At my side an old old man, the picture of poverty, near-sighted, ragged, bent, with long white hair and a long white beard. I stopped, and he stopped too.

Ah yes! I understand! This old man beside me is I—myself, reflected in a mirror of the shop! . . .

Farther along, the crossing of two streets.

Aha! A house that looks familiar. My house—the house where I used to live!

So that was the goal toward which I had been going all along unconsciously!



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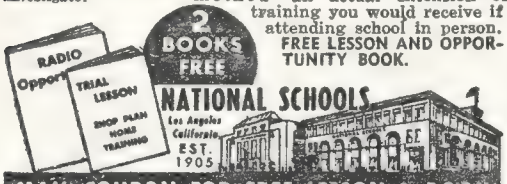

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My legs seemed suddenly paralyzed, I could go no farther. I leaned against a wall there where I was; and I gazed, and gazed, with all my eyes. . . .

With all my eyes, I say. . . .

The street was full of people, crowding sidewalks and pavement, edging about this way and that and talking in hushed voices. Most of them were dressed in black. A goodly number of military and naval men in parade uniform were standing to one side, grouped around some higher officers whose plumes I could distinguish over the heads of the throng. Among them a tall impressive personage, with a grand cordon on his breast. A noble face of regular outlines! Ah yes! My admiral, the governor! Vice-Admiral de Fierce!

A Cross, with priests behind it. The red cauls of the choir boys stand out against the surplices and albs of white and gold. A canon's gown is fidgeting nervously about in the company of clergy. . . .

All eyes are on the door of my house, which is heavily draped in mourning. A shield of velvet has been set up above the casing and on it I can read two initials in silver: A. N. Of course: A. N.: André Narcy! That's what they must stand for.

Of course! I understand! My funeral! Of course!

Here is the hearse, slowly drawing up as the crowd divides before it. The horses are heavily caparisoned; on the four ebony columns that adorn the coffin-rest, four heavy plumes are waving. And oh, how many wreathes!

Ah! . . . What's the matter now? The crowd is all astir. . . . They are probably bringing out the body. . . . Yes, there it is . . . the hooded bearers are coming down from the front door. How fast they walk! Not much of a load after all. . . . . I rise on tip-toe to see better. . . . My coffin is of the flat topped kind common in the South of France! The wood cannot be seen. They have draped it in a heavy cloth. . . . Here are some other men in hoods. . . . They go up to the hearse and place on my coffin a military cloak of mine—light blue—then a cavalry sabre, with its scabbard; and these clink as they are laid one across the other. Of course . . . that's the custom at military funerals . . . my uniform and my sword! I suppose my Distinguished Service Cross is there. . . . I cannot see it. . . . There is hardly time to look at everything. . . . For . . . something else I see . . . yes . . . with those eyes of mine, those moving unfailing

eyes that can see through walls, and rocks and trees. . . . They can see just as well through the boards of a coffin. . . . Yes, I see, I see perfectly well!

Oh! Oh! Oh! What horror! What horror!

A BLAST of trumpets. . . . The cortège moves. . . .

Leading the way comes the priests chanting the ritual . . . the ritual of the dead. . . . Then eight officers, the pall-bearers of honor. Then the soldiers. . . . At last, the hearse. . . .

The crowd moves off behind the procession.

Now they have turned the corner . . . on the way to the church . . . and thence to the cemetery. They seem to be hurrying . . . yes . . . because night is falling fast. . . .

One by one the windows close. The street is empty now.

* * *

I remained where I was, my back still propped against the wall. My weariness overcame me suddenly. My legs gave way at the knees. I slipped slowly to the ground.

Yet the determination to go on arose within me. I got to my feet, somehow. I crossed the street toward my house! Toward my house—of course! Where else should I go, except to my house?

The front door had been left open, the heavy black crêpe dangling around it. I reached the threshold! I stopped.

There in the hallway stood a little table covered with a black silk tablecloth. On it was an ink-well, a pen, and a heavy funeral register. Through the open door a draught was coming strong, blowing the black-bordered pages over one by one.

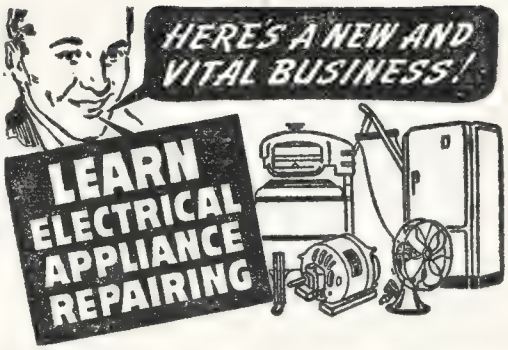
I turned them back, and found the frontispiece.

It was covered with hastily scribbled signatures. There my friends and messmates, along with many strangers, had written their names, as the custom is. Yes, and heading them all, was my name, the name I had formerly had, that is. It was not written, however, but penned in print:

MONSIEUR CHARLES-ANDRÉ NARCY

CAPTAIN OF CAVALRY, D.S.C.

Died the twenty-first of December, 1908, in the thirty-third year of his age.



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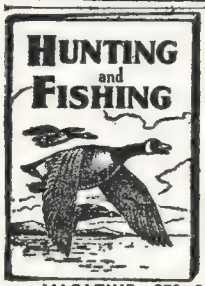

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I picked up the register and hid it under my clothing—the threadbare rags that had once been my riding suit.

And I went away!

I went away. Why not? This house belonged to Captain Charles-André Narcy—the man who was dead. . . . My house was somewhere else . . . obviously . . . somewhere else.

I went away.

* * *

And I walked rapidly, outside in the street. . . . Rapidly, yes; though I staggered at every step from sheer exhaustion. . . .

The street was . . . no . . . it was not quite deserted. . . . There, on the sidewalk across from me stood . . . a man? A woman? Someone! Someone who was standing motionless in front of the house, and looking at the door that was heavily draped in mourning. . . .

A man? A woman? A woman! A good-looking woman . . . well dressed . . . a single piece dress of a light color. . . . She was carrying a muff, a big fluffy muff that completely swallowed her small hands . . . a muff of ermine. . . .

I knew the woman. Of course! It was she . . . Madeleine. . . . I knew her very well. But, you understand . . . I was dead, was I not? Besides, I was very, very old. . . . Surprised more than moved. . . . In fact, not at all aroused . . . my emotions! Just surprised! But very much surprised!

Anyhow . . . I would just walk by her . . . curiosity merely. . . .

Yes, she, beyond a doubt. . . . Her eyes were glued to the door of mourning. And I could see . . . that was strange! . . . why, she was weeping, weeping . . . great silent burning tears!

With a moment's hesitation I stepped up to her:

"Mad . . ."

She started from her grieving reverie, saw that I was there, swept her great muff across her tear-stained cheeks. . . . Then she felt around inside the muff with her fingers, tossed me a handful of coins . . . and fled. . . .

And I fled too.

There was no doubt after that! I was dead! Very very dead! More dead perhaps than He, than the other Man, whose corpse I see, I persist in seeing there inside its coffin . . . a terrible wasted corpse, fright-

fully decomposed. More dead than He, because He does not know that He is dead; while . . . I . . . I . . .

Furthermore it was not his funeral they were celebrating; it was mine. . . . I am the man those tears were for . . . and those flowers, and those uniforms, and the hushed voices of the multitude . . . all that fascinated gazing at my decoration, my shoulder straps, my sabre . . . there on the coffin. And those same people are now shivering out there in this cold of a December evening . . . to pay their respects to . . . me . . . to me . . . not to Him.

And I should be there too . . . with them. I must hurry. . . .

Is there something beyond death, I wonder Something? Anything?

No! I cannot believe that possible! I can see that corpse too well . . . that corpse, in its coffin. . . .

* * *

A great crowd around my grave . . . almost as great as the throng in front of my house. . . . It is only a short walk from town . . . the graveyard. . . .

No, the ceremony is over. . . . The sexton is filling the grave. . . . I can hear the gravel as it strikes my coffin. . . .

It seems to be all covered now. . . . I walked too slowly. . . . But I was very tired. . . .

The earth they are throwing into the hole. . . . I can feel it heavier and heavier upon my chest. Six feet deep. . . . I never knew it could be so very heavy!

Now everything is over. The grave is filled. . . . The people are going home.

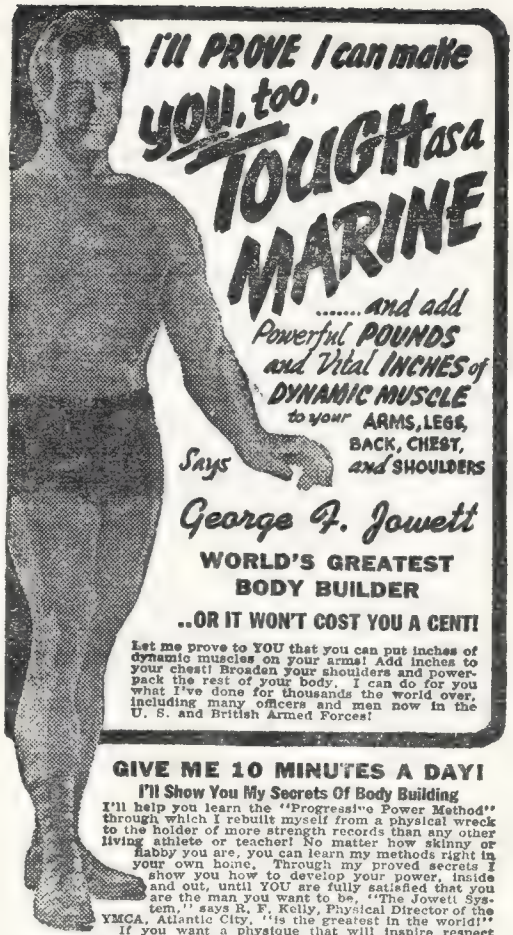
Home? No, I shall stay here! Where have I to go? This place here, henceforth is home for me . . . my home!

NOW all is written. I have told my story.

Here my pencil rests on this flagstone, this lid of shale that covers my grave and already bears my epitaph. My pencil. . . . I laid it here. It is worn to the wood. And I have closed the register. All its pages to the very last are covered with my cramped close-scribbled writing.

All is written. You who read what I have written know the truth . . . for the love of your God, if you have one, do not doubt my word . . . but understand, believe. . . .

The sun has vanished below the horizon. Night has come. . . . My last night. . . . Yes, death will come to me ere long! My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life has run its course. Its lamp is going out, because the oil has burned away!

On this long polished flagstone which has been my writing table and on which my elbows rest I can still spell out my epitaph, though the light is failing:

Here Lies
CHARLES-ANDRÉ NARCY
Born April 27, 1878.
Died December 21, 1908.

December 21, 1908 . . . or January 22, 1909. . . . January 22, 1909—that's today! Just a month less one day . . . I have been here on this tomb, on my tomb, waiting for death, my second death. . . .

A month. . . . One month. . . . And all the while my eyes have been gazing down under this flagstone . . . my eyes? . . those other eyes, I mean . . . which see . . . which insist on seeing . . . implacably . . . gazing down under this flagstone upon a coffin . . . my coffin. . . . The coffin is quite new and undecayed. . . . But it holds only a skeleton . . . a naked skeleton, without clothing . . . its clothes . . . my clothes, were far too thin . . . they fell to dust immediately. Nothing except the bones are left; and they too are all but vanishing. On them, however, I can see something . . . the letter of the colonel of artillery . . . they buried it by mistake with the corpse . . . it is still quite legible. . . .

A month . . . one month! The earth came up around the edges of this flagstone . . . so heavy that it sank into the loosened ground. . . . Some workmen came and leveled the mound again, tamping the earth down under the stone . . . so heavy the stone . . . and heavy the earth under it. . . . Oh, my tired body cannot support such burdens longer. . . .

Tomorrow when they come to bury me they will put me in another grave. . . . And I shall have that other earth and another stone to bear!

The weather is clear. . . . Not a single cloud disturbs the even azure of the firmament. . . . The winter wind has fallen and the branches of the cypress trees have ceased their murmuring. . . . A gleam of blood-red light is striking on their black tips. . . . Over all the heavens and over all the earth is a great and sombre beauty glows. . . . Splendor and Serenity . . . reaching even into my soul. . . .

Farewell. . . .

THE READERS' VIEWPOINT

(Continued from page 65)

INVITATION TO WRITE

John Taine's "The Greatest Adventure" was terrible. His "The Iron Star" was original and interesting, it contained some of these scenes found so seldom, that are delightful within themselves.

Despite the objection of your blasé readers (I think it is just pretension on their part) I enjoy all primordial stories. When prehistoric monsters raise their ugly heads and gaze off across the weird terrain I crouch deeper into the novel. "Day of the Brown Horde" was not fantastic, but it was fine adventure.

One reader wrote that Burroughs, Haggard, Verne, Wells, et cetera, were easily obtainable in book form. They speak only for themselves. Even in a town large as Birmingham, fantasy books are rare. I have been searching a long time for "Tarzan at The Earth's Core" and "Tanar of Pellucidar" by Burroughs, "Ayesha" and "Nada, the Lily" by Haggard, and some of Verne's books.

I have read most of the Dunsany's stories, but he is not out of place in F.F.M. I once wondered why he did not use his other name. Now I know. It is Baron Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett!! Besides his weird tales, he wrote some humorous ironical plays, of which "The Lost Silk Hat" is probably the best.

Though some stories I disliked appeared in F.F.M., the magazine is many times better than any other of its type. It has the best artists. The best readers' department. The best stories. Why do so many readers criticize the magazine's title? It would not seem right to buy it under any other name.

"The Lost Continent," despite Deucalion, was a splendid novel. I never tire of a story of Atlantis. I love to imagine that Phorenice *did* discover the Secret of Life and now dwells behind the stars. Did Hyne intend for Deucalion to be so old at the story's end, as he was, or did he somehow make a mistake in his writing? The demolition of Atlantis was not a third as good as the destruction in "Day of The Brown Horde."

Could anyone tell me the titles of books about Mu?

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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

About "The Machine Stops" I stopped on page 20. It was awful—it really was.

Really, I cannot understand the requests for trimmed edges. I like rough edges.

Did not like "Before I Wake." Kuttner should remain with science-fiction. "The Boats of Glen Carrig" was moderately good. But too much space was used to describe the building of the bow. What did the tree-people at the place where the men first landed have to do with the rest of the story? Hodgson's repetition is infuriating. "Even a Worm"—inane, passé. The illustrations for Hodgson's story were really fine, especially the one of the tree-people.

Anyone between the ages of 18 and 30 who likes fine books, whether they are by Merritt, Hemingway, Marcel Proust, Thorne Smith, or Thomas Wolfe, please write me.

CALVIN BEARDEN.

General Delivery,
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CALL FOR HELP

I wish to obtain copies of the following stories, preferably in copies of the magazines in which they originally appeared:

By H. P. Lovecraft: *The Lurking Fear, The Dreams in the Witch-House, The Horror at Red Hook, The Strange High House in the Mist, The Temple, The Nameless City, The Shunned House, The Silver Key, Dagon, Arthur Jermyn, The Cats of Ulthar, At the Mountains of Madness;* Lovecraft and E. H. Price: *Through the Gates of the Silver Key;* Frank B. Long: *The Horror from the Hills;* L. Ron Hubbard: *Final Blackout;* A. E. van Vogt: *Black Destroyer in Scarlet, Seesaw, Repetition, Vault of the Beast, Slan;* S. G. Weinbaum: *Dawn of Flame;* George Allan England: *The Thing from Outside;* Manly Wade Wellman: *Twice in Time;* Catherine L. Moore: *Judgment Night;* Fritz Leiber, Jr.: *Conjure Wife, Gather, Darkness;* Abraham Merritt: *Through the Dragon Glass.*

I also want copies of the two Finlay portfolios, Weinbaum's *The New Adam* in book form, the Wallace Smith art portfolio, and the Wright's Shakespeare Library Edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—with the Finlay illustrations.

Anyone who is in a position to supply some of my requirements is requested to write to me.

THOMAS G. L. COCKCROFT.

7 Roslyn Road,
Napier,
New Zealand.

F.F.M. TAKES A BOW!

When I was younger—in my high school days—I was a rabid science fiction fan. The more lurid the cover, the more dashing and adventuresome the story, the better I liked it. A year of college considerably tempered my choice of literature and I would purchase and

read only those magazines which contained more mature stories—those showing obvious preparation and written not merely to take up space, but to convey a definite idea to the reader—at the same time satisfying his desire for a well-formed plot. Leaving school for the Army I found myself in the past two years with little time and less inclination to read what I now consider, for the most part, to be comic strips in print.

You may be interested to know, however, that with the exception of one magazine which occasionally approaches your very high standards, I have read without fail every issue of F.F.M. since late 1942, when I entered college. What is the strange fascination that your magazine with its lurid though well-painted covers holds over cultured and intelligent persons such as are the majority of your correspondents and, I'm sure, the majority of your readers? It can't lie in your short stories. I cannot recall a single short story in F.F.M. which wasn't insipid, boresome, and utterly without thought-provoking qualities. ("The Hashish Man" is a good example).

It must therefore lie in your excellent choice of book-length novels. I have enjoyed everyone of these for as long as I can remember—to varying degrees of course—and your last offering, "The Ancient Allan," is as fine a presentation as I could possibly hope to read. To give you an idea how much "The Ancient Allan" appealed to me, I can say that though I enjoyed "The Boats of Glen Carrig" and "Phra, the Phoenician" they don't compare with Haggard's excellent narrative. If you can maintain this new-set standard of engrossing literature (which I unhesitatingly call it) my hat's off to you.

I have no suggestions to offer in the line of new material. I am not familiar with authors and works of the type you use.

Thanks for your time and congratulations on a surprisingly fine magazine.

HOWARD C. COLEMAN.
2nd Lt., A.C.

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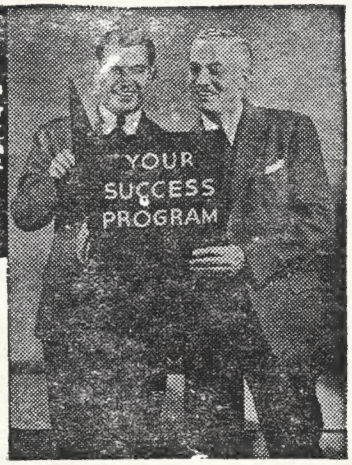

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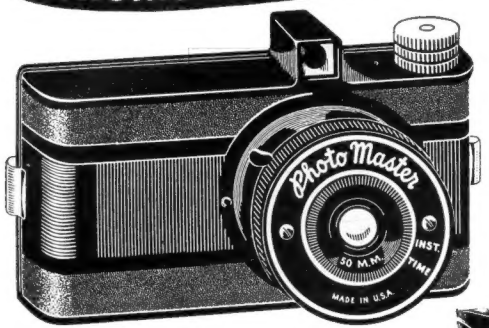

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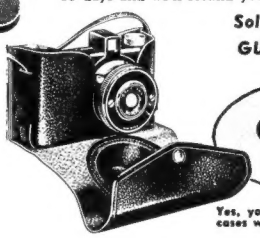

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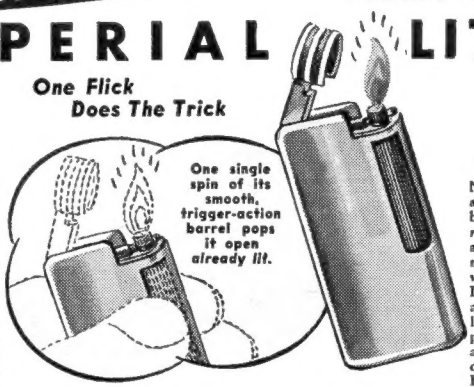

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